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The Construction and Performance of Adulthood in 18- to 25-year-old GED Students: A Narrative Exploration

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Clara Amelia Davis entitled "The Construction and Performance of Adulthood in 18- to 25-year-old GED Students: A Narrative Exploration." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

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The Construction and Performance of Adulthood in 18- to 25-year-old GED Students: A Narrative Exploration

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Clara Amelia Davis
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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents,
David and Harriet Davis

letting me be me
always encouraging me
made this possible

And written for
Alan, Booman, Blacq'Barbii, Carly, Jack, JeVaunte, Juice,
Kayla, Lisa, Marie, Matt, Susan and other GED students everywhere

sharing your stories
your courage never ending
your words inspire me

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Abstract

This dissertation is a narrative study designed to address the changing meaning of adulthood for youths matriculating into adult basic education programs by drawing from the interdisciplinary perspectives of postmodernism, critical social theory, and narrative methodology. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, and their construction and performance of adulthood. Twelve GED students, ages 18 to 25, enrolled in local non-profit adult education programs, were interviewed individually regarding their experience of leaving high school, transitioning into an adult education program, and their construction and performance of adulthood. Data sources included interview data and field notes. Data analysis was carried out at multiple levels and included structured narrative analysis and thematic analysis of interview data. Layered re-representations were used to present data highlighting participants' experiences of leaving high school and transitioning into adult education classes, their inaugural moments of adulthood, and their construction and performance of adulthood. Findings did not support popular theories of development that sanction young adulthood as a sequential period of developmental tasks or those theories based on age-graded normative development markers. Instead, the interview data revealed a disruption to the traditional development sequences that psychologize the meaning of adulthood but revealed the social and structural factors that determine the sequence of development, when transitions to adulthood occur, and how adulthood is constructed and performed. For high school leavers, structures such as education, teachers, and teacher-student relationships play an important part in youth transitions out

of high school, into adult education, and into adulthood. The following conclusions were drawn from the findings: (a) adulthood is accelerated for some youths depending upon circumstances, structures, and agency, (b) construction and performance of adulthood are analogous, structurally produced and culturally framed, and (c) life experience and financial independence, rather than age, are deemed the most important factors in reaching adulthood. The findings point to the complex, ambiguous, and uncertain nature of adulthood, made up of multiple disconnected routes indicating that traditional development theories cannot and should not be packaged as a normative path to understanding.

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Prologue

Welcome Me, Adulthood

Welcome me, Adulthood, I have ventured
through childhood with all the wonders and dangers in it.

I have placed my childhood fantasies aside,
and picked up hopes of becoming who I want to be.

Embrace me knowledge,
I am ready to know more and add to what I know already.
I have conquered my fear of the night,
now I only fear of becoming nothing.
I have stopped pretending to be what I thought I was going to be,
and realized that I am only what I make of myself.

I have come down from the land of make-believe,
and I have found the strength to believe in me.
So when I come upon you, open your arms,
and welcome me, Adulthood,
for I am headed your way.

- Christina Cooper ©1999

Chapter One

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a changing demographic in adult basic education due to an increase in the number of traditional high school-aged students (ages 16 to 20) enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) (Hayes, 1999; Imel, 2003; Perin, Flugman, & Spiegel, 2006). According to the American Council on Education and the GED Testing Service (2010), since 2005, 16- to 24-year-olds have accounted for more than half of the General Education Development (GED) test population. The changing face of adult basic education along with what some have coined the "youthification" of the GED (Nelson, 1999), makes it relevant to reconsider what it means to be an *adult* and, moreover, to examine the meaning of *adulthood*, including when and how youths transition as adult learners.

The identity of the adult education field is primarily built around the identity and development of the adult (Houle, 1961; Jarvis, 1983; Jones, 1984; Knowles, 1968, 1973; Lindeman, 1926; Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2006). As public school systems, community colleges, alternative high schools, and non-profit organizations offer GED as an alternative to a high school diploma in a nation focused on "second chances" (Bloom, 2010), increasing numbers of youths are matriculating into adult education programs rather than finishing high school (Barton, 2005; Imel, 2003).

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates the number of school leavers[1] at about 3.5 million (Planty et al., 2009). Some explanations offered as reasons for this trend include (a) increased requirements for graduation due to school reform measures (Hayes, 1999), and (b) the condition set forth in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act) that stipulates *adult education* includes those "individuals who have attained 16 years of age and who are not enrolled or required to enroll in secondary school under state law" (WIA, 1998, Title II, Section 203). It is the latter that is most informative in the argument presented in this study. Adult basic education programs traditionally geared toward adult learners are now seeing an increase in 16- to 24-year-olds who enroll, thus creating the opportunity for those programs to be legitimate alternatives for youth in some states (Smith, 2002).

The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) reported that from 1995 to 2005 individuals aged 16 to 24 had a higher overall participation rate in adult education activities than their counterparts age 55 and older, though age distribution varied by program area. For example, in Adult Secondary Education (ASE), 67 percent of students were under age 25 and nearly half (46 percent) of the students in Adult Basic Education (ABE) were in the same age group. The exact number of high school-aged students in adult education programs is difficult to determine due to national reporting requirements that inconsistently group students within a 16- to 24-year-old category (Hayes, 1999; Welch, & Di Tommaso, 2004). However, the

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[1] The term "dropout" was rendered in the 1960's and brought with it political, social, cultural, and economic interpretations (Anders, 2009; Dorn, 1993). In this study the term "school leaver" replaces "dropout" to avoid negative connotations associated with the term "dropout" (Dorn, 1993).

American Council on Education (2011) recently documented that individuals who were 16- to 24-years old accounted for 53.2 percent of all GED test candidates. While the GED Testing service does not specifically state that the younger demographic of candidates was enrolled in GED or ASE courses before taking the GED test, it can be assumed that this was the case for a significant number among that demographic because many states require students to register for adult education classes and to take an official GED Practice Test prior to taking the official GED Test.

Requirements for taking the GED test vary from state to state. The GED Testing Service, a program of the American Council on Education, only requires that candidates be at least 16 years old and not enrolled in high school. As long as this minimum standard is met, each state or jurisdiction can amend the requirements to suit its own needs including, but not limited to, testing fees, locations, eligibility, and passing scores. (American Council on Education, 2011).

Having taught and administered adult basic education for nearly 15 years, I have come into contact with "adults" of different ages, at different developmental stages, and from various backgrounds. My personal and professional experience is consistent with the data that indicate a decidedly younger population of students is enrolling in GED and ABE classes. The reported increase in younger adult education learners leads me to consider how *adult* is defined, when a person becomes an *adult*, and at what point youths leaving school transition as *adult* learners. These are layered and complex questions to explore, but they signal the need to move beyond a fixed concept of what it means to be an *adult*, particularly as it applies to young adulthood. It is important to recognize that the

social construction of *adulthood* is situated within cultural, political, and historical contexts (Wertsch, 1991; Bonk & Kim, 1998) and is understood and developed through the telling of personal narratives. It is through this dissertation research that I attempted to unmask the identity of *adulthood* by collecting the narratives of youths transitioning as adult learners.

Statement of the Problem

As the adult education population gets younger and responds to external conditions, youths are "changing the meaning of adulthood" (Wyn & White, 2000, p. 171). There is an increasing need for practitioners and program planners to reconsider what constitutes *adult* and *adult education* because an understanding of the changing meaning of *adulthood* is fundamental to developing programs and policies that will address the needs of these younger learners (Wyn & White, 2000). It has become evident that the field and study of adult education is lacking research on the perceptions, understandings, and definitions of young adulthood. There is little literature in the field of adult education that addresses and defines *adult* or *adulthood* from the perspective of youths enrolled as adult learners. Adult education literature discusses both psychological and social theories of adult development, but there has been little discussion of the social construction of adulthood and the importance of this discussion as it pertains to the changing face of adult basic education. Research that explores young adulthood and

captures inaugural moments[2] of adulthood would shed light on how younger adult education students define and perceive themselves.

In a comprehensive review of the literature of the transition to adulthood, Hogan and Astone (1986) acknowledged the importance of biological and psychological aspects of transitions. However, of the more than 100 references cited in the article, none addressed young people's perceptions of the transition to adulthood or how those going through this transition experienced it themselves. I argue that it is only after this missing piece is gathered that adult educators can begin to better understand what adulthood means and how those constructions and performances of adulthood impact adult basic education and its changing demographic. In light of both the gap in the literature and the matriculation of younger students into adult education programs, it is important to explore youths transitioning as adult learners, particularly with regard to their personal construction and performance of adulthood.

Purpose of the Study

When I began this project, I wanted to find out if 18- to 25-year-old GED students considered themselves to be adults. I was curious about how they identified themselves considering that they were enrolled in an adult education program. As I moved forward in

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[2] When considering inaugural moments, I take up Thomson et al.'s (2002) definition of "critical moments," which are derived from narratives and defined as an event "described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities" (p. 339). This is similar to Mezirow's (1981, 1991, 1995) "disorienting dilemma," which is described as an event triggering a new experience that is a transition point toward a new way of thinking and being. This is explained further in Chapters Three and Five.

the research process, I realized there were multiple aims within this study. While the primary purpose of this dissertation never changed throughout the course of this project, it became apparent that investigating the construction and performance of adulthood within the context of participants' transitions as adult learners would become a crucial element. Furthermore, capturing the inaugural moment of entry into adulthood for those who considered themselves adults had the potential to aid in understanding that transition. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation research was to explore the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, and their construction and performance of adulthood through narrative.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as the focus of this study:

1. What is the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, transitioning as adult learners?
2. How do 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood?

The second question contains both *construction* and *performance*, which could arguably be split into two questions. However, I chose not to treat them separately as it is my belief that construction cannot be separated from performance because identity is constantly being performed (Butler, 1988; Madison, 2005a, 2005b) based upon socially constructed reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Significance of the Study

It is expected that this study will contribute to adult education literature and the understanding of perceptions about adulthood. Utilizing multiple constructed definitions of adulthood may affect practice, administration, and research in the field. Presenting alternatives to the psychologically-based stage theories and embracing new constructions of adulthood has the potential to increase motivation for instructors and practitioners, encourage critical reflection, and extend thinking beyond the majoritarian discourse surrounding adulthood.

There is a stigma attached to leaving high school within particular social and cultural contexts. According to Fine (1996), "Dropping out sits at the knotty nexus of economics, racism, public institutions, and questions of individual agency" (p. xvi). Historically, the adult basic education student population has been made up of minority students from low socio-economic backgrounds, often with negative prior schooling experiences and intergenerational low literacy (Belzer, 2004; Quigley, 1997). In addition, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, racial minority groups, and various family structures have been found to be more prone than others to leaving school (Weis, Farrar, & Pétrie, 1989), forcing them to become marginalized as "dropouts." "Marginalized" is used in reference to those who are pushed to the margins of society due to the social and systemic structures that are in place and in which society is expected to operate. For example, the structures of meritocracy and credentialism (Labaree, 1997) that operate in the U.S. education system reward graduating from high school and view a diploma as a necessary credential toward social mobility. ABE and GED students are

marginalized by their level of education and, having not completed high school, are pushed to the margins, excluding them from some aspects of the labor market and higher education systems. Other forms of marginalization include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation.

This study has the potential to be significant because it takes on a diverse and often overlooked group of adult learners and allows their words to be heard. Instructors, administrators, and program planners who adopt a socio-cultural understanding of young adulthood may be encouraged to look more closely at the transition students are making when they return to school as adult learners. More practitioners may begin to acknowledge that social inequities based on constructs of race, gender, and social class affect a student's transition, the learner's development into adulthood, and teacher-student interaction (Baumgartner, 2001). An increase in practitioners' cultural awareness regarding race, gender, and social class along with an increased cultural awareness of their students and program participants, has the potential to create a new era of modernity for the field.

This research also has the potential to contribute to adult development literature because it will shed light on the social construction of adulthood from an adult education student perspective, which is often left out of adult education literature. Presenting a perspective of adult development from an emerging point of view is important if adult educators intend to take up a broader perspective of adult development and if they wish to expand the conversation among educators of adults regarding what *adult* means. Findings from this research may contribute to the study of adult education in the

followings ways: (a) adding to adult development literature, (b) illuminating issues of practice, including program planning and development, and (c) providing instructors with the opportunity to become more reflective in their own approach to practice by hearing the stories of their students' experiences and understanding of adulthood.

Delimitations

This study is bounded by three delimitations. The first delimitation is the age of the participants. Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) defines "adult" as an individual who is 18 years of age or older (WIA, 1998, Title II, Section 101). Ironically, the WIA defines "adult education" as "services or instruction provided below the postsecondary level to individuals who have attained 16 years of age and who are not enrolled or required to enroll in secondary school under state law" (WIA, 1998, Title II, Section 203). Though services can be provided at age 16, I decided to recruit participants between 18 and 25 years old in order to avoid any complications due to Institutional Review Board requirements for conducting research with minors.

Second, although I acknowledge the value of understanding multiple perspectives, for the purposes of this study I focused exclusively on how adult basic education students performed and constructed *adulthood*. I did not address the musings of instructors or program planners and their notions of how *adult* should be performed and whether or not the students in their respective programs were considered adults. Choosing not to formally interview site coordinators and adult education instructors, other than for the purpose of gathering information about the site and its programs, allowed me to celebrate

and privilege the stories of the students I interviewed and their constructions of adulthood.

Third, I chose to limit the number and type of data collection sites. I visited two different sites, both non-profit, grant-funded adult education programs. While their target populations differ, their delivery of services is similar. Both sites offer daytime classes in one multi-level classroom with one instructor and, on occasion, a volunteer tutor. These programs were chosen due to availability and access.

The decision to use non-profit literacy organizations was based on the difficulties encountered previously in obtaining permission to conduct research from larger state and federally-funded adult education programs in the area. I limited participant recruitment to two specific locations due to my connection to these programs as a volunteer tutor from 2010-2012.

Limitations

Some potential limitations emerged during the planning and data collection stages of this study. The proposal for this project noted the difficulty encountered in arranging a pilot interview with a participant already committed to volunteering. After explaining the project, having her sign the informed consent, and collecting her contact information, I was never able to reach her again. This could have happened again during the data collection phase of this project, but that instance emphasized the importance of avoiding delay; instead, I interviewed volunteer participants the same day they agreed to participate. The limitation arose when I was unable to contact more than half of the participants after the interview: phones were disconnected, voicemails or text messages

were not returned, or the student stopped attending class.[3] Lack of communication with participants after the first interview limited opportunities for member checking (Glesne, 2010) with follow-up interviews.

The findings in this study are not generalizable, nor were they intended to be. The findings represented here could be considered limited by the lack of time I spent in the field with the participants (Hatch, 2002). I interviewed 12 participants for 36 minutes on average, collecting just over seven hours of interview data from primary interviews. Narrative researchers never know what their "participants' stories may leave out" or how the language may "obscure aspects of the meaning of experiences they are telling about" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 10). A more complex understanding of the construction and performance of adulthood may have been captured through more time in the field with the participants, including lengthier interview sessions and participant observation.

Definition of Terms

Below are brief definitions of key terms used throughout this project:

1. *Adult Basic Education (ABE)* – education programs intended for adults aged 16 and over who do not have a high school diploma. ABE programs provide instruction in basic academic skills including reading, writing, and math for adults functioning at the lower literacy levels to just below the secondary level.

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[3] It was shared with me by site coordinators and instructors that some of the students who stopped attending class did so because they obtained their GED. The reason others stopped attending was unknown in most cases.

2. *Adult Education* – in this text, “adult education” has been used to refer to a group of programs including Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and English Literacy (EL). The first two are defined in more detail below. In the field, practitioners, program planners, and policy makers use “adult education” interchangeably with “adult basic education.”
3. *Adult Literacy Education* – a broad term that captures many aspects of adult education, including literacy, ABE, ASE, GED, and EL.
4. *Adult Secondary Education (ASE)* - instruction for adults whose literacy skills are approximately at the high school level and who are seeking to pass the General Educational Development (GED) tests or obtain an adult high school credential. This term is used interchangeably with GED both in practice and in this text.
5. *Construction* – a term based on the belief that meaning is not discovered but constructed. The experience of reality and the way people make meaning of their experiences is constructed within their interactions with the world (Berger & Luckman, 1966). “Construction of adulthood” refers to how 18- to 25-year-old GED students understand and define adulthood.
6. *General Education Development (GED)* – included under the umbrella of Adult Secondary Education for adults who left school and did not receive a high school diploma. When used colloquially, “GED” refers to a group of five subject tests which, when passed, certifies that the taker has high school-level academic skills. Also referred to colloquially as "General Equivalency

Diploma" or "General Education Diploma.” GED is used in place of ASE throughout this text.

7. *Performance* – refers to the belief that “human beings are a naturally performing species” (Madison, 2005a, p. 149), and that performance is omnipresent in our social and discursive interactions of experience, social behavior, and culture. Because we are always performing, personal narrative is a mode of performance that constitutes identities and experience, producing and reproducing that to which it refers (Butler, 1988). “Performance of adulthood” refers to whether or not 18- to 25-year-old GED students identify as adults and what actions they consider adult actions and subsequently carry out themselves.
8. *Workforce Investment Act (WIA)* – Federal funding that supports adult literacy programs in the United States and dictates, under Title II, that Adult Basic Education programs must assist (a) adults in becoming literate and obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency, (b) adults who are parents in obtaining the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children, and (c) adults in the completion of secondary school education.

Epistemic and Ontologic Orientations

A researcher’s adherence to transparency and methodological thoroughness contributes to the rigor and credibility of the research process. Equally important is the need to recognize that “how you study the world determines what you learn about the

world" (Patton, 2002, p. 125). Indeed, qualitative research has come to a point of blurred genres through the interdisciplinary approaches and multiple ways in which it can be undertaken (Denzin, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Many researchers, including me, find themselves borrowing from different disciplines and struggling "to locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive texts" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 3).

I locate myself between research paradigms and often have to absorb the epistemic and ontologic tensions this creates for me as a novice researcher. My work is situated within narrative and ethnographic understandings and draws from critical social theory and transformative praxis in order to maintain a commitment to education that contributes to social justice and emancipation. For me, this consists of (a) a critical constructivist epistemic orientation (Kincheloe, 2005), which is the belief that multiple realities exist and that power plays a vital role in the social construction of knowledge, and (b) ontological commitments to pursue human agency, democracy, equality, and human empowerment.

I draw upon social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966) when interpreting the world. I do not want to suggest that my experience of reality should be viewed as truth or as more true than another's experience of reality. Instead, I wish to acknowledge that my construction of reality is only one of many views and that multiple realities are constructed in multiple spaces. As someone committed to social advocacy and social justice, I am interested in learning about the way experiences are constructed and performed in different spaces based on historical, cultural, and social contexts.

This dissertation research has given me the opportunity to more closely attend to the social constructions and discursive practices (Giddens, 1987)[4] of the naming and the performance of adulthood in the field of adult basic education. In this project I claim that adulthood is a socially constructed phenomena fabricated through the interactions we have with others and based on prior knowledge and beliefs generated within society from its culture, norms and values. This work is situated in an interpretive frame with a postmodern emphasis on the discursive nature of knowledge (Agger, 2006; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). Narrative inquiry and narrative analysis guide the interpretive work. For me, narrative is a choice that connects closely with my constructivist epistemic orientation, allowing meaning to be constructed through stories that can be told and received, acknowledging that narratives are always partial, fragmented, and shifting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Langellier, 1999; Noblit et al., 2004).

Positionality

Many qualitative dissertations have reflexivity statements, a declaration of the researcher's assumptions, bias, and position within the research, included in the first few chapters of the dissertation. I have chosen to include an extended section on my positionality in Chapter One because I believe writing and reflecting on my position was a learning experience and an integral part of the research process. Positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the *Other* (Madison, 2005a; Merriam et al., 2001). Race, gender, class, education, sexual orientation, age, and commitments are all

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[4] Giddens' (1987) refers to the "linguistic turn" in social theory that explores the intersection of language and social practices.

factors of positionality (Glesne, 2010; Merriam et al., 2001; Noblit et al., 2004). Villenas (1996) addressed positionality in terms of culture by exploring the relationship between her Chicana cultural background and her relationships with both the Latino community and the dominant English-speaking community, realizing that "as researchers, we can be insiders and outsiders to a particular community of research participants at many different levels and at different times" (p. 722).

Throughout this project I have acknowledged my positionality and explored the intersectionality of my own identities (Crenshaw, 1991). The term "intersectionality" was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and addressed the issue that the experiences of women of color fell between white feminist and anti-racist discourse, therefore marginalizing them within both. She argued that it was the intersection of race and gender that shaped the experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1991) defined intersectionality as a "disruption of the tendency" to see issues such as race, social class, and level of education as "exclusive or separable" (p. 1244) for they are neither exclusive nor separable, and I am always performing at the intersection of those identities which include being white, middle class, and having a graduate degree. Reflexivity remained a constant part of the process throughout this research (Pillow, 2003). I recognize that the personal and cultural histories, privileges, and commitments I carry with me informed and shaped this work. It is for this reason that I believe it is important to share how I came to this research and why I chose to explore the experiences of GED students.

The purpose of sharing my positionality as part of this chapter is to make explicit the presuppositions I brought to this project and to acknowledge that my interpretations

and representations have consequences (Hall, 1997). They have consequences because the framework of interpretation I brought to this project determined how I re-represented the participants and their stories throughout this text. Those re-representations give meaning to both the participants and their stories and will be taken up in multiple ways and multiple contexts in this dissertation. Here, I present the ways in which I came to this work, chronicle my journey as a researcher, discuss my professional and personal commitments as well as the intersections of my race and social class, and share how I engaged in recursive reflexivity throughout this research.

How I came to this research. I came to this research with the assumption made by some postcritical ethnographers that I "exist within a critical discourse" that makes me "responsible for the world" I am producing when I "describe, interpret, and critique" (Noblit et al., 2004, p. 24). Engaging in ongoing research work, I have begun to take up the interdisciplinary tenets of critical social research (Agger, 2006; Denzin, 1986) as a means to act upon commitments to particular and personal political ideologies and to share those commitments with a larger community of readers and activists.

The impetus for this project was my own experience with, and interest in, Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) populations. I was compelled to carry out this research by my desire to motivate practitioners, to encourage critical reflection, to attend to adult student transitions, and to act upon my need to acknowledge the social inequities that I believe exist in adult education and affect youths transitioning as adult learners. My ardent curiosity about issues surrounding adult basic education, vocational education programs, welfare-to-work programs, and refugee and

immigrant assistance programs that move refugees toward economic self-sufficiency (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004), leads me to conduct research in areas that I believe can affect social change. The more people who know about the issues at hand, the greater potential there is to change old ways of thinking and create a new modus operandi. I commit morally to my own research with the belief that possessing the know-how to conduct research gives the researcher an active hand in societal awareness and the potential to be an agent of change.

When considering my own position, I adopt Noddings' (1992) argument that identity is always connected to context: "Who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life" (p. xiii). As a burgeoning researcher, understanding my positionality and my journey as a researcher is critical to acknowledging my place within research. For years I have identified as an adult basic education practitioner through my work both teaching and administering ABE and GED programs. Now, I also identify as a researcher who carries out work in the field of adult basic education. Working with adult students in each of these capacities, I have become aware of the challenges many adult basic education students face through stories shared with me in the classroom, through my own research, and from literature in the field. I have come to believe that because they are operating within societal and systemic structures of inequality as adults "without a high school diploma," ABE and GED students face obstacles including, but not restricted to, (a) limited work opportunities or unemployment, which can result in limited income and public assistance (Tyler, 2003), (b) lack of transportation resulting in diminished access

to resources, including basic education classes, and (c) prior negative schooling experiences (Beder, 1991; Drayton & Prins, 2011; Quigley, 1992, 1997; Rogers, 2004; Rogers & Fuller, 2007). For example, I have occasionally been witness to the timidity and mistrust with which adult students re-enter the classroom. ABE students have often reported that they left school due to negative experiences (Belzer, 2004; Crowther et al., 2010). When individuals consider returning to school as adult students, previous negative experiences in school can impact personal motivation and cause hesitation in re-entering the classroom (Beder, 1990; Beder & Valentine, 1990). However, there is agency (Giddens, 1984) carried out with the return to school or in the classroom. Awareness and experience such as this allows me to conduct research that creates a space for student voices to be heard and gives way to representations of those agentic moments. Through hearing and sharing student voices, I have the opportunity as a practitioner to better frame the areas of my practice in need of improvement. Moreover, as a researcher, I hope that through hearing and witnessing the shared stories of the participants, practitioners will gain insight into the types of educational experiences that adult students may have had and how the gendered, racial, cultural, and social roles they embody shape their experience with education.

My journey as researcher. Our historical and social contexts act as frames of reference for our identities (Hall, 1997). During my journey as a novice qualitative researcher, I have come to recognize that each person has multiple stories based on lived experience and shaped by positionality in the cultural context where they locate themselves and where they are positioned by others. Prior to beginning this work, I

considered my own assumptions about this project and my hopes for the broader group of adult educators by reflecting on my own position, including a priori theory, personal philosophy of education, experience in the field, and relationship to research sites and the participants interviewed. I begin here discussing my journey as researcher with an excerpt from the research journal kept throughout the course of this project. This entry refers to a conversation with my friend, Robert, an international scholar of adult literacy. I chose this passage as a starting point because it demonstrates the tension I felt in articulating my own identity as a researcher.

> Spring/Summer 2011
>
> *Robert just told me I do not always "live the life I research." At first I was confused so I asked him what he meant. He went on to say that he didn't always see me live a life that advocated for the same things that I advocate for in my research. He said, "For example, if you claim to do critical work, then you should be living your life and viewing the world from a critical perspective all the time." I don't live the life I research?*

My friend's comments provoked an emotional response from me because his words made it seem as though I was living a double life, and one of deception at that. It was as if on one hand I claimed to "care" about systemic inequities and issues of injustice, but on the other hand I situated and acted upon those claims when it was of benefit to me, such as in my research. His assumption was that there was an epistemic and ontological separation between my life and my research. I came to realize, through much reflection, they are not separate for me. Researcher is but one of many identities I take up, and it is always

performed at the intersection of my other identities, such as White and middle class. Identifying as a researcher performing at the intersection of White and middle class is useful regarding the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) it produces in whitestream contexts where the capital can be exchanged, allowing me to advocate for those I recognize as marginalized individuals, such as school leavers, through volunteer work, community service, and the research I choose to do. My class and race privilege also provide the capital I need to interact socially and professionally within the academy among an educated group of peers, who by most accounts would be considered privileged and have the resources to bring about change. The power attached to being White and middle class is utilized, exchanged, and performed differently in different spaces (Madison, 2005b).

Since that day in August 2011, I have given much thought to my identity as a researcher and to my positionality. Like Madison (2005a), I agree that "[p]ositionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects" (p. 7). I acknowledge and lay claim to my race and class and the power that comes with being White and middle class. Those claims position me in relation to the participants in this project, the majority of whom are raced and classed in particular ways and are positioned systemically at the intersection of adult basic education as high school leavers. For example, the African American participants I interviewed who identified as low-income are not just African American and low-income at the intersection of adult basic education. They are, within the dominant discourse perpetuated by educational policy and

social media, Black, poor, high school dropouts. An example of the intersection of race and class and high school leaving is the work of Fine and Zane (1989), which explored the lives and educations of low-income women who leave high school. They observed, "The absence of a diploma for women within race and class lines can be economically devastating" (p. 27). Black women who leave school are more likely to live in poverty than White women. These intersections are important to consider in the construction and performance of participant identities (Crenshaw, 1991) and navigating the hyphen between *Self-Other* (Fine, 1994). Thus, positionality and power are influenced by a number of factors, including my professional and personal commitments and my race and class. These factors are described below.

Professional and personal commitments. I teach ABE and GED classes and conduct research in the field of adult literacy. The adult students with whom I have worked over the years have challenged me daily and touched my heart profoundly. I did not come to adult education intentionally but by chance, not completely aware of what it was all about and by all accounts naïve about ideas of power and privilege. For example, when I started working in adult literacy I would often take pity on those students who entered adult basic education with stories of a turbulent childhood or teenage years filled with exposure to crime and illegal work. If they struggled to read, perhaps I coddled them too much, as though they were children learning to spell. I later came to understand that even students who completed high school were, at times, caught in a system that allowed them to graduate with elementary reading levels. Eventually, my need to become an

agent for change was realized as I began to question the system and took notice of the social and systemic structures that fueled divisions of race, class, and "reading level."

Those structures had always been there, but for some reason I had never recognized them. Now, I could not ignore them and began to question my own professional and personal identity as I worked to articulate my passion for adult literacy programs and students. Not only have the students with whom I have worked helped me to recognize and understand the privilege, power, access, family, and socialization that I have been afforded throughout my life, but I have been fortunate enough to witness the empowering difference education can play in the life of an adult. When I started my work in adult basic education, I never realized how much I would learn about myself and my personal commitments in the process.

I am committed to issues of social advocacy and social justice. For me, social advocacy and social justice go hand-in-hand and question the status quo. I view social advocacy as representation carried out by anyone committed to the concerns, whether rights-based or need-based, of any particular group in society. I argue social justice is foremost about building bridges between those who are marginalized and those who are not. I believe social justice acknowledges two things: (a) human agency is a key part of social change, and (b) teaching is a political act that is never neutral. It is a concept that incorporates a broad range of sociological dimensions in education. I view it as a fair distribution of advantages in education and society, with particular attention to fairness and equity in regard to race, gender, class, disability, age, and sexual orientation. For educators this means creating a basis for understanding systemic inequality and

oppression based on other identities including, but not limited to, classism, heterosexism, racism, and ableism.

It is my belief that knowledge is socially constructed, people create their own meaning and institutions, and structure and agency are dialectical (Giddens, 1984) and necessary for social change. My personal need to conduct critical research (Carspecken, 1995; Madison, 2005a, 2005b) is led by my commitment to lived experiences and stories coupled with my desire to interrogate the ways in which certain groups are privileged over others. I am drawn to critical social research (Agger, 2006; Denzin, 1986) as a means to empower marginalized populations, respond to the class struggle, openly take up political commitments, and raise consciousness about present systemic inequities. This type of research enables me to strive for an emancipatory research agenda that educates toward social change.

Race and class. Before talking about localized cultural and diversity issues, it must be acknowledged that race matters because it is socially, politically, and historically constructed and positions human beings within a system of inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Frankenberg, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Madison, 2005b; Milner, 2007; Parker & Lynn, 2002). I consider understanding my own history and privilege as a White scholar to be important aspects of my positionality due to the racial make-up of the participants I interviewed. In order to claim my racial identity, I must "carry the history of that race with me" every day (Anders, 2010). I must own it, its history, and the assumptions that come along with it.

I identify as White. Until graduate school, I had never heard of the term *white privilege. White privilege* is defined as "an invisible package of unearned assets that [Whites] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [they are] meant to remain oblivious" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 98). Now, having begun to understand my race and what it means to be White, I cannot ignore it, nor am I plagued by White guilt (Aal, 2001). Stories of race are real, and they help me draw connection to my reality and remind me of just how idealistic my view of race and racism can be at times. I now acknowledge that I am witness to stories and counter-stories (Delgado, 2000) on many levels every day. It is through this acknowledgement and my commitment to narrative that I work harder to recognize those stories in my professional and personal work. I must always consider the multiple layers of identity in the work I do both as a practitioner and researcher.

I must also acknowledge my social class because, like race, it is a construction that structures stratified society and shapes daily life in ways that value some lives more than others (Anderson & Collins, 2007; Bettie, 2003; Lareau, 2003). Moreover, I perform at the intersection of both my race and class. I was raised in the South as a member of the middle to upper-middle class. My parents owned a custom-built home. I never had to use public transportation. We dined out. We went on vacation as did the other families I knew. In high school I travelled as an exchange student, and finding money for college applications was not a problem. Now, as a full-time graduate student, I consider myself middle class. I have the benefit of being able to go to school full-time rather than working two jobs and raising a family on my own. I have the time I need to do

volunteer work. I attend national and international conferences where I present my work and learn from the work of others. I am by all accounts privileged.

I share my "White world" and my identification as middle class as a matter of transparency. It is the intersection of race and class in the U.S. that determines the social and cultural capital held to exchange in life. "[W]hiteness is an upwardly mobile identity and Blackness is not" (Wilkins, 2008, p. 11). Nine of the twelve participants interviewed for this project self-identified as African American; the other three identified as White. Ten identified as low-income. There is no doubt issues surrounding white privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), level of education, and social class affected my position within this research as there was inherent power held in my race and my social status sitting across the table from each participant. With each interview there was the potential to be named as interviewer, White, and rich, among other labels. This position of privilege created a hyper-awareness regarding issues of racial and social power throughout this project.

My reflexive self. I practiced recursive reflexivity (Leary & Minichiello, 2009) and interrogated my positionality throughout this project in order to maintain transparency and layer my understandings. As a lifelong learner, researcher, and practitioner, it is my belief that personal and professional learning and development cannot take place without recursive reflection. It is only through the recursive art of reflective practice that we are able to create a deeper understanding of ourselves and gather meaning from our experiences. Recursive reflexivity requires continually looking back and questioning the very practice of reflection. At the root of reflective practice is

the increasing awareness of the social, cultural, historical, and political forces that frame our assumptions, values, and intentions both professionally and personally. I consider the practice of reflexivity to be significant in the research process (Leary & Minichiello, 2009; Pillow, 2003; Watt, 2007).

Throughout this study, I maintained a research journal that chronicled my journey through this project. The journal captured my reactions and musings as well as the struggles I encountered when faced with a "reflexivity of discomfort" that pushed me toward "the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research" (Pillow, 2003, p. 193). My intention when I started the journal was to use it as a space for reflection and a means for critically reflecting upon my research decisions. As this journal grew, it became a space for more candid thoughts on my research as well as a reflexive space where I worked out decisions regarding the project through writing as a means of inquiry (Goodall, 2000). From April 2011 to February 2012 I made approximately 60 journal entries. Most of these entries were made during the data collection phase of this project. I used the journal to reflect upon how my assumptions were shifting, the effects my anxiety as a novice researcher did or did not have on this project, and my time spent with each participant. I repeatedly analyzed my feelings and attitude toward the world itself as well as what I was learning in the process of writing.

The process of regular and recursive reflection pushed me to places in my thinking where I did not imagine going. There were shifts in my understanding of who I imagined 18- to 25-year-old GED students to be. For example, when I started this project, I thought many of the participants would consider themselves an adult simply due to their

age. What I came to understand was that there were multiple layers of adulthood for these participants and that age was the least relevant. I was continually forced to consider my preliminary (and often naïve) assumptions, how those assumptions were impacted or changed, and how those changes came about. Throughout this text, I have chosen to share relevant journal entries as a way to maintain the transparency mentioned earlier. It is my hope that readers will embrace this reflexivity as my attempt to remain present and transparent throughout the course of this study.

Organization of the Dissertation

In the first chapter I have provided an introduction that included the purpose of this study and the problem being addressed. I have outlined the research questions guiding this work, discussed the potential significance of the study, noted the delimitations and limitations, included relevant definitions and terms, and discussed my positionality in depth. Chapter Two is written to orient readers to areas of study that informed this work. I present relevant literature from adult education, adult development, sociology, and youth studies. Chapter Three begins with a discussion of my theoretical and methodological orientations followed by an outline of the methods of data collection and data analysis. I explain how I selected research sites and recruited participants, each of whom is introduced in that chapter. I close Chapter Three by presenting criteria for establishing trustworthiness and discussing ethical considerations made in the research process.

In Chapter Four, I respond to the first research question by re-representing the experience of the participants leaving high school and transitioning into GED classes

through a performance script, an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 1999), developed using their words. Chapter Five includes my analysis and interpretations of the inaugural moments of adulthood described by eight of the twelve participants. The chapter begins with a discussion of inaugural moments followed by a brief explanation of how I used Labov's (1972) structured narrative analysis. Next, I present my interpretation of the data in terms of story structure and structural function, ending with a discussion of transitions to adulthood. Chapter Six responds to the second research question, focusing on construction and performance of adulthood, through the use of poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997) as well as my interpretations and connections to literature. In Chapter Seven, I explicate my conclusions, discuss the implications of this work, and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two

Context for the Study

It is important to give context to this research by providing an overview of the history, literature, and trends that inform this work. This chapter is not intended to be a full review of literature but rather an attempt to give some background that will aid in understanding this project. First, I provide a brief outline of the history of adult basic education in the United States. Following this historical overview is a presentation of ways in which adulthood is often constructed, including definitions, theories of adult development, and age and development. The chapter closes with a discussion of a more recent trend in the literature, transitions to adulthood.

Historical Overview of Adult Basic Education

Lack of basic skills in adults is an important and influential factor fostering some of our social and economic problems in the United States today. The history of adult basic education has been stigmatized by changing definitions of literacy and adulthood. Broadly, adult education can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries to formal education such as apprenticeships and informal adult learning in homes, churches, taverns, and town meetings (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). The history of adult education, however, has been "complicated by the changing idea about who is considered an adult" (Sticht, 2002, p. 4). For example, Long (1975) reported that age 14 was considered a marker for adulthood during early Colonial times. When collecting information on adult literacy in the 1840, 1850, and 1860 census, the U.S. Census Bureau defined an adult as age 20 or over (Soltow & Stevens, 1981), yet in 1870, the definition of adult was changed

to include persons 10 and older (Cook, 1977; Soltow & Stevens, 1981). From 1900 to 1940, the U.S. Census Bureau used people age 10 and older to calculate literacy statistics and age 14 and older from 1950 through 1970. Since 1970, age 16 or older has qualified as an adult for U.S Census data statistics regarding adult basic education (Cook, 1977) and, as noted in the introduction, currently age 16 is identified under the Workforce Investment Act as the age at which individuals not enrolled in nor required to enroll in secondary school are eligible to receive adult education services. While age 16 is a marker of eligibility for adult education services, age 18 marks entry into legal adulthood in the United States as indicated by the right to legally work, participate in contracts, vote, marry, give sexual consent, and join the military ("Age of the Majority," 2005). There is a contradiction between *how* an adult is defined in the U.S. and *whom* adult education includes, thus causing confusion among adult educators, researchers, and students alike.

The GED test was first developed in 1942 by the Federal Government, at the request of the military, for returning World War II veterans requiring basic skills for more advanced workforce training and higher education. The test became available to civilians in 1947 when the state of New York implemented a program to award its high school diploma to those who passed (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). While informal and formal adult education programs dating back to 17th and 18th centuries have impacted the history of adult literacy education, it was the Kennedy administration's War on Poverty in the 1960s that served as an impetus for the current formal adult literacy education system in the United States. During that decade, education was beginning to be

recognized as a means to improve the economic status of the poor and unemployed. In 1964, the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) was a turning point for adult education, and Title II B marked the first time that federal funds were allocated for adult literacy education. The Adult Basic Education Program of Title II B required that adult basic education be provided for adults 18 years of age or older who had completed eight or fewer grades of schooling. Though the federal definition of adulthood has taken on different forms in terms of age, years of school, and so forth, the definition of adult literacy education has not changed very much since the 1960's (Cook, 1977).

Title II B of the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964 remained salient into the 1970's, but with the 1970 amendments the Adult Education Act opened up to include Americans 16 years of age or older. When the inclusive age was lowered, the number of adults potentially affected and now eligible for adult education services rose from 24 million to 69 million (Cook, 1977). Because Native American adults as well as adults who were non-native speakers of English were included for the first time in the Act, the scope of population and services adult basic education programs needed to provide broadened dramatically. Through the 1980's the United States saw a rise in national, state, and local discussions regarding adult literacy education. Beder (1991), Sticht (1988), and Quigley (1997) linked this discussion to (a) the increased concern with national productivity during the 1980s and into the 90s, and (b) a heightened awareness of the link between education and economic development. However, it was not until 1998 that the most prominent adult education legislation in history took effect.

Shortly after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1994, more commonly known as *welfare reform*, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) replaced the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Like the welfare reform two years earlier, WIA shared a workforce development interest that would eventually affect Adult Basic Education. The 1998 WIA funding supported adult literacy programs in the United States and dictated that ABE programs must assist (a) adults in becoming literate and obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency, (b) adults who are parents in obtaining the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children, and (c) adults in the completion of secondary school education. As St. Clair and Belzer (2010) reminded readers, the WIA of 1998 impacted ABE as it consolidated workforce development and ABE systems under one funding stream. The move of ABE under the umbrella of workforce development allowed researchers, program planners, and practitioners to form new partnerships that focused on the development of employability skills (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010).

At the time of writing this dissertation, adult basic education still operated under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. As of 2011, Congress had not reauthorized the WIA even though it was scheduled for reauthorization in 2003. Local and state programs operate under the original 1998 legislation with regard to Title II, and advocacy groups call out for more advocates to join them in the effort to reauthorize Title II and increase funding for adult basic education. According to the U.S. Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), workforce development at two-year colleges is currently the fastest

growing area of college services in many states, and English as a Second Language programs are the fastest growing component of the state-administered adult education.

Despite its complex history and minor successes, adult basic education remains a field that transforms lives on a daily basis. Its impact is not to be overlooked. It is important to remember that 93 million adults in the US struggle with literacy, 30 million have skills considered *below basic* literacy, and 11 million cannot communicate in English (Baer, Kutner, & Sabatini, 2009). According to the 2003 *National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NAAL), *below basic* is the lowest Basic Reading Skills (BRS) level. Adults at this level read fewer than 60 words correctly per minute (White & Dillow, 2005). Lack of basic skills potentially affects an individual's ability to earn a living wage. Many adults do not have the literacy skills they need to help their children with school, to take better care of their health and the health of their families, or to vote and participate fully in civic life. Understanding the history of adult basic education since its formal inception in 1964 is important in order to realize that over the years ABE has been a means toward emancipation and economic stability.

Constructing Adulthood

This section provides context regarding the construction and understanding of adulthood, beginning with a brief introduction to the ambiguity encountered when trying to define adulthood. Next, I draw upon selected definitions to briefly discuss ways in which *adult* and *adulthood* have been defined. Finally, I provide an overview of adult development models and age-graded influences that have lent themselves to constructing definitions of adulthood.

Historically, the achievement of adult status had to do with markers, rituals, and rites of passage (Blatterer, 2007, 2010; Côtè, 2000; Settersten, 2011; Shanahan et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2011), but more recently there has been what I consider to be a blurring between youth and adulthood. More Americans are waiting longer to get married and start families, and more young adults in their mid-twenties are returning home to live before moving out on their own (Côtè, 2000). Though indicative of privileged classes, these scenarios, along with rituals and rites of passage such as college entrance, college graduation, marriage, and financial independence, impact understandings of adulthood. The boundaries between child and youth or youth and adult are unclear, making it a challenge to actually define adulthood (Jarvis, 1985). For many, "Adulthood is circumscribed by historically and culturally specific practices and expectations, achievements, and competencies. It is fixed in our minds as childhood's other and as adolescence's not-yet-attained destination" (Blatterer, 2007, p. 10).

Adulthood is a social construction that implies that there is a social consensus on the meaning of adulthood, a set of commonly held criteria against which to measure adulthood (Blatterer, 2010; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Everyday social interactions and conversations, as well as scientific discourse regarding human development, feed off one another, thus reifying popular discourse and resulting in a plethora of competing definitions and representations with which *adulthood* has become associated with over time (Blatterer, 2007). These established definitions, perceptions, and representations of adulthood impact policy, program planning, student recruitment,

and research in adult education, making it difficult both in practice and in research to definitively define *adult* and *adulthood.*

Definitions. The terms *adult* and *adulthood* are vague concepts and do not lead to an understanding of the intrinsic nature of adulthood. Côtè (2000) explained the etymology and history of these two words. *Adult* first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1656. Interestingly, *adulthood* did not appear until over 200 years later. In terms of etymology, *adult* comes from the Latin *adultus* (grown), which is the past participle of the Latin word, *adolescere* (grow up, mature). According to Côtè, *adolescent* began to be used in the English language in the late 1400s, but *adult* was not used for at least another half-century. Though *adulthood* was first used in a literary work by a scholar, Charles Cowden Clarke, to describe Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* the term did not come into circulation in United States until after the Civil War and toward the end of the nineteenth century when it became the default position to describe a life stage situated between adolescence and old age (Blatterer, 2007). Looking closely at the etymology and historical uses of *adult* and *adulthood* sheds light on cultural perspectives of discourse and, in this case, demonstrates that historically people did not make the age distinctions that are made today. Merser (1987) illustrated this by describing her personal journey into adulthood and her struggle to understand why she and her friends did not "feel" like adults. She summarized her experience and research:

> The invention of adulthood is a recent one and because its definition is still evolving (and will continue to do so) it's hard to know…when you've grown up

> "enough." Adulthood as we know it has its minimum requirements, and no end to possibilities. (p. 53)

Merser's reaction suggests that perceptions and understandings of adulthood, age, and aging are evolving in contemporary culture (Smith & Taylor, 2010) and differ from the historical understandings of adulthood.

One of the reasons I believe adult education has had difficulty defining itself since inception is that over time multiple definitions of *adult* and *adulthood* have been presented in reference to adult learners and adult education. A few definitions of interest include those of early adult educators, Eduard Lindeman and Malcom Knowles. Lindeman (1926) believed that maturity defined the limits of adulthood and that adult education was defined by and inclusive of these limits. Malcom Knowles (1980) united the social and psychological components for adult educators with his two-part definition of an adult: the first part social, the latter part psychological. First, an adult performs social roles "typically assigned by our culture to those it considers to be an adult," and second, a person is an adult to the point at which "that individual perceives herself or himself to be essentially responsible for her or his own life" (p. 24). Both Lindeman's and Knowles' definitions lend themselves to ambiguity and multiple interpretations, and that of Knowles implies the social construction and individual performance of adult identity. Paterson (1979) used age and social expectations of maturity as "justification" for adulthood. Quite simply, he stated, "Adults are adults…because they are older than children" (p. 7). He continued by contending that those with the status of adult are deemed to be adults because "by virtue of their age, we are justified in requiring them to

evince the basic qualities of maturity" (p. 13). The problem with both Lindeman's and Paterson's definitions is that maturity is not defined, nor is it argued to be socially constructed. More recently, Merriam and Brockett (2007) defined adults as "those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults" (p. 8). This definition also presents problems. First, Merriam and Brockett did not mention the type of age to which they refer. As will be discussed later in this chapter, age is often a factor in conceptions of adulthood but can be put into a number of categories (i.e., biological age, chronological age, social age). Second, in this definition *adult* can be defined in three ways: (a) by age, (b) by social roles, or (c) by self-perception. However, these categories can clash: For example, a 17 year-old mother does not have the legal age of an adult and may not consider herself to be an adult though she carries out the social role of "mother" often associated with adulthood. Does this make her an adult? If so, then can it be assumed she is defined by her socially constructed role rather than her own identity of self? These are questions to consider and that I argue are best explored through personal narratives.

Development models. The relationship that exists between adult development and adult education has primarily been informed by psychology and has been viewed as an important component of adult learning and adult learning theory (Tennant, 1991). Understanding the adult development process has been put forth as a critical factor for practitioners and program planners if they intend to develop relationships with a broad spectrum of adult learners (Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989). I espouse an understanding of adult development as necessary for the gamut of adult educators but that this

understanding should not come purely or predominantly from psychology. Unlike the field of child studies, the field of adult development is still fairly young. Thus, there is some conflict between theories, among theorists, and across disciplines (i.e., psychology and sociology) as to what factors determine when a person becomes an adult. There are many different models, theories, and perspectives of adult development, but there is no "right" model because the perspective of the theorist and researcher lends itself to different understandings and constructions of what makes an adult. There are some models and theories that have been drawn upon more than others. For the purposes of this research, I will briefly discuss theories of adult development, including both stage and non-stage theories that focus on entering adulthood and transitions made from adolescence to young adulthood.

In the 1930's, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung scripted four stages of life: (1) childhood, (2) youth/young adulthood, (2) middle age, and (4) old age (Campbell, 1971). Jung was one of the first to describe an adult developmental position in psychology, and several adult development theorists have built upon his early concepts. An early example in adult education literature of a stage model of development is Havighurst's (1953, 1972) theory of developmental tasks. In his theory, Havighurst (1953) first defined a "developmental task" as that

> which arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and to success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by the society, and difficulty with later tasks. (p. 2)

There are a number of different tasks at each of the six stages outlined by Havighurst. His claim was that completion of each task would lead to increased happiness and successful completion of future tasks but failing to complete the tasks has the potential to result in unhappiness and disapproval of others. Examples of tasks delineated by Havighurst (1972) in the stages of young adulthood include: (a) selecting a mate, (b) starting a family, and (c) managing a home. Like other stage models that are briefly discussed below, Havighurst's "developmental tasks" stem from a combination of social expectations and personal values, both of which are dependent upon social and cultural context.

Erik Erikson's (1963) theory of identity development is commonly recognized across disciplines as a model of development. Erikson viewed the developmental stages of life in eight "psychosocial stages," and he focused his theory on development in adolescence and young adulthood, claiming that these stages were universal. The first five stages cover childhood and are basically an extension of Freud's work on psychosexual development. The last three stages are those most frequently called upon in adult development: (a) young adulthood, which signals a struggle between intimacy and isolation, (b) middle age, a struggle between generating new ideas and stagnation, and (c) old age, a struggle to achieve a sense of ego integrity. Relevant to this study is Stage V, adolescence, designated as the central crisis of identity versus role confusion. The adolescent stage of life must be resolved before moving into the stage of adulthood (Erikson, 1963). According to Erikson, in order to develop a complete identity, a person must move through each stage and resolve the struggle presented at each stage.

Levinson (1978) was another theorist who influenced adult education. His stage theory of midlife change included development in the late teens and the twenties. Levinson's theory is best conveyed as four universal stages of development, called "eras," each lasting about 25 years. The eras are comprised of (a) Preadulthood, birth to age 22; (b) Early adulthood, age 17 to 45; (c) Middle adulthood, age 40 to 65; and (d) Late adulthood, age 60 and onward. Most relevant to this study is the time between age 17 and 22, which Levinson called "Early Adult Transition." According to Levinson (1986) this era is

> a developmental period in which preadulthood draws to a close and the era of early adult-hood gets underway. It is thus part of both eras, and not fully a part of either. A new step in individuation is taken as the budding adult modifies her or his relationships with family and other components of the preadult world and begins to form a place as an adult in the adult world. (p. 5)

The fundamental tasks of this stage are the apparent redefinition of relationships with family and significant others, such as developing a personal identity that is separate from parents and childhood peers, and trying out new types of relationships such as friendships and romantic and professional relationships.

Though stage development models were and still are considered popular theories of adult development, other models have been developed out of skepticism for stage models (Courtenay, 1994; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). These take up a socio-cultural perspective, perceiving change to occur throughout the lifespan but without sequential

stages. For example, Neugarten (1976) landmarked time, age norms, and expectations as key determinants in staging adulthood:

> Age norms and age expectations operate as a system of social controls, as prods and brakes upon behavior, in some instances hastening an event, in other delaying it. Men and women are aware not only of the social clocks that operate in various areas of their lives but also of their own timing; and they readily describe themselves as "early," "late," or "on time" with regard to the major life events…social age continues to be marked off by relatively clear-cut social events: marriage, the birth of a first child, the departure of children from home, and the birth of grandchildren. (p. 16)

While Neugarten (1976) posited that life is socially ordered, age could be viewed as a factor in personal identity based upon the social and discursive practices of culture. It is my belief that though adulthood and adult development are related to age, they are not determined by it, and practices such as social policy should not be determined according to age but rather by where individuals are in their lives.

More recently, drawing on the work of Erikson and Levinson, is the work of human development theorist, Jeffrey Arnett (2000), and his theory of "Emerging Adulthood." Arnett's theory has only recently been cited in adult education literature (Smith & Taylor, 2010; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009). Emerging Adulthood is distinct from adolescence and young adulthood in that emerging adults are not constrained by traditional social roles and expectations. In his seminal work, Arnett (1997) conducted two parallel studies over a two-year period and presented their results together.

Participants in Study One were college students, ages 18 to 23, who were nearly all full-time students. Participants in Study Two were persons aged 21 to 28, many of whom were married, employed full-time, and had at least one child. Both groups were given a questionnaire regarding their conceptions of adulthood. Participants were asked direct questions such as, "Do you think you that you have reached adulthood?" as well as questions concerning demographics and background information (Arnett, 1997). Arnett found that the results of the two studies were very similar in terms of biological markers for age but strikingly different in response to the question, "Do you think that you have reached adulthood?" While 63% of college students responded "in some respects yes, in some respects no," only 35% of participants in Study Two responded this way, the majority (63%) responding "yes." Based on his findings from this work and follow-up studies, Arnett posited age 18 to 29 as a time of cultural variability when adolescents no longer see themselves as youths but do not yet classify themselves as adults (Arnett, 2000; Smith & Taylor, 2010). Despite criticism of being Euro-centric and middle-class specific, Arnett's theory exists as a normative life stage in economically developed countries with variations between cultures, ethnicities, and social classes (Arnett & Tanner, 2011).

Well-known linear and sequential models such as Erikson's (1963) and Levinson's (1986), and more recent theories like Arnett's (2000), do not reflect the real-life experiences of people across social and cultural divides. Instead, these models psychologize the meaning of adulthood and rely on clinical training to determine whether individuals "fit" a particular developmental sequence (Courtenay, 1994). As Dannefer

(1984) asserted, "There is no available basis for assigning weights or values to various experiences, choices, strategies, life events, or domains that are interpreted as evidence of periods, eras, and transitions" (p. 103). I agree with Dannefer, and the question remains, What happens when the development sequence is disrupted, when it does not match white-stream hetero-normative theories? This type of question has drawn attention to socially constructed notions of adulthood in adult education. Bjorklund and Bee (2008) posited that social factors shape adults' life courses. Tennant and Pogson (1995), along with Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2006), reasoned that people are positioned socially and culturally and, in order to gain a better understanding of how adults develop, it is necessary look more closely at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. Merriam and Brockett (2007) advocated an integrative approach by defining adulthood as a social construction that is fluid, dependent upon particularities within society and culture, and further defined by psychological maturity or social roles. This integrative approach moves relatively far from earlier theories of stage development and calls for a view of development, incorporating mind, body, culture, and in some cases, spirituality (Tisdell, 1999). It acknowledges that social factors determine the sequence of development, when transitions to adulthood occur, and how adulthood is constructed and performed.

Age. Age is important in both formal and informal ways. For example, age guides legal rights and entitlements. Informally, "age enters into and shapes everyday social interactions, even in subtle and unconscious ways, affecting how we judge and act toward people we encounter in our daily rounds" (Settersten, 2011, p. 170). There tend to be

shared assumptions about the "right" chronological ages at which to experience life events, particularly when it comes to education as these assumptions are often fueled by the fact that "formal schooling is largely organized by age" (Maralani, 2011, p. 5). For example, most children begin school at age five when they enter kindergarten and finish high school at age 17 or 18. Those who transition to college are likely to do so shortly after completing high school. High school leavers and GED students, such as the participants I interviewed, do not fit these age-specific norms regarding school, transitions, or adulthood. Age must be taken into account when considering the meaning of adulthood because it has been and continues to be considered a marker of life stages, development and maturity, and an anchor for meaningful experience (Settersten, 2011; Shanahan et al., 2005). Sadly, the focus on age has diminished the significance of inequalities and differences that exist between groups of young people (Wyn & Woodman, 2006), marginalizing those who do not fit the age sequence constructed as normative markers of adulthood (Blatterer, 2010).

Ideas regarding age and aging as they relate to adulthood are evolving (Smith & Taylor, 2010, p. 50). Age can be divided by type into five categories: (a) Chronological age, the number of years that have passed since birth; (b) Biological age, the physical condition of the body; (c) Psychological age, the ability to deal effectively with the environment compared to others; (d) Social age, the expected roles a person takes on at a specific point in life; and (e) Functional age, often considered a combination of chronological, biological, psychological and social ages (Bjorklund & Bee, 2008; Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2006). This leads to questions: Are biological age and

psychological age factors in determining adulthood? And, are social age and chronological age stronger determinants due to societal expectations of maturity and responsibility?

Modern Western society is an age-graded society in which much social interaction and social life is structured around "socially standardized age categories" (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 99). For these reasons, young people are pulled between competing versions of adulthood—one version stresses autonomy and independence, while the competing version stresses interdependence (Henderson et al., 2007). Gender, ethnicity, race, and social class frame the choices that confront young adults. Late modern theorists suggest that the changes in relationship between the individual and the social give youth greater agency (Giddens, 1984, 1991) to invent their own adulthoods.

According to Tennant and Pogson (1995), age structuring has three distinct features in the life course: (a) age structures are influenced by history and culture, (b) age structures are embedded in consciousness like social structures such as race and class, and (c) the social construction of age categories change over time. It is with these definitions of age and the power of naming what is and is not an adult at particular moments that I argue adulthood cannot be confined by the limits of age. Instead, age is a construction that conjures up the notion that certain things *should* happen at a certain time in one's life per the status quo. For example, a woman in the United States should graduate from high school at age 18, marry after college around age 23 or 24, and have her first child by the time she is 27 because fertility begins to decline at that age (Dunson, Colombo, & Baird, 2002). These tend to be the age event norms within the discourse of

White middle class America but are not necessarily the narrative of other cultures, races, ethnicities, or social classes. However, age does matter: In the U.S. age determines voting privileges, the right to enlist in the military, permission to work, when mandatory schooling can begin and end, and when a person is no longer a "dependent." Giddens (1991) posited that no simple solution for growing up exists, but "young people think a good deal about the events in their lives" like the ones listed above and the way in which those events lead to being an adult (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, & Park, 2005, p. 315). Thus, age is often a factor in determining adulthood.

Entry into adulthood is complex, variable, and socially defined. The definitions, theories, and development models cited here were chosen to expose some of the discordant constructions of adulthood and what it means to be an adult. Psychological theories of development, like those of Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1978), are concerned with normative psychological development (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2006), which involves identifying stages and processes of development. Likewise, age-graded norms of development and age structuring are part of a discourse that implies normativity and equanimity. These static approaches remind us to be mindful of the impact of taking up single-perspective theories or sharing and "maintaining conventionally held views about what it means to be a mature, healthy adult" (Tennant, 2006, p. 57). It is the intersection of factors including race, gender, and social class rather than a single factor that affects the construction and performance of what it means to be an adult. It is necessary to look at biological, psychological, and social factors when considering the construction and performance of adulthood and commit to a socio-

cultural and integrative perspective (Clark & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam & Brockett, 2007), recognizing that adulthood is too complex to put into a single category.

Transitions to Adulthood

This section discusses the concept of *transitions to adulthood*. First, I will outline the basic concepts of transitions drawing from adult education, youth studies, and sociology. Next, I will briefly discuss the historical markers of transitions to adulthood followed by a description of how transitions to adulthood have changed in the last half of the twentieth century.

In the last decade, the concept of *transitions* has gained popularity in adult education (Simpson & Cieslik, 2007; Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006). Discussions continue regarding the process of adult learners *transitioning* from adult basic education to higher education and into the workforce. Many of these discussions about adult education focus on systemic and institutional practices of adult transitions rather than on the social practices of transitioning to adulthood. In the field of sociology and youth studies, the concept of transitions to adulthood is not new as there is tradition in these fields of studying the transition to adulthood per the "sociodemographic statuses a person has achieved by a given age" such as student, worker, spouse, and parent (Fussel & Furstenberg, 2005, p. 32). Transitions to adulthood have also gained popularity with economists and social demographers due to demographic patterns that suggest the period of time it takes youths to transition to adulthood is longer than it was previously (Arnett, 1997; Furstenberg, 2000; Furstenberg et al., 2004; Osgood et al., 2005). This trend

potentially impacts policy if adulthood is no longer thought to begin where adolescence ends (Furstenberg, 2000).

Conceptualizing transitions. *Transitions* has been conceptualized and constructed in many ways. In traditional psychology, the term *transition* is used to refer to changes in behavior or cognition, whereas in developmental psychology, *transition* is used in terms of stages. Sociologists attend to sociocultural demands and define a *transition* as "a change in identities, roles, and statuses that are within the awareness of the individual members of their in-group, their subcultures, and the culture of society" (Kloep & Hendry, 2011, p. 56). Considering more specifically the move from youth to adulthood, *transition* is often defined as a trajectory from dependence to independence (Irwin, 1995; Pollock, 2008). Osgood, Foster, and Courtney (2010) called the time between high school the twenties "a time of semi-autonomy during which youth typically remain dependent on their parents in many ways" (p. 210). It is a complex process in which youths, who have been dependents their entire lives, begin to move toward social independence and take on what are constructed as adult roles such as citizen, spouse, parent, and worker (Waters et al., 2011). However, there can be long-term effects on how youths fare during their transition to adulthood.

Transitions are generally considered smooth for college-bound, middle-class youths, but research is limited for youths from other backgrounds (Osgood et al., 2010). These groups of youth are referred to as marginalized, vulnerable (Osgood et al., 2010), and disconnected (Waters et al., 2011). Despite what little is known about these groups, it is speculated that they struggle to navigate the transition to adulthood due to systemic

inequities and access to resources (Jekielek & Brown, 2005). The participants in this research could be identified as part of any of the groups mentioned above. It is through their stories and experiences I seek to uncover and better understand the multiple layers involved in transitioning to adulthood, acknowledging the social and cultural factors often left out of these discussions.

When considering the transition from youth to adult, it must be noted that there are "wide gaps between the experiences of young people…and the policies that inform the institutional structuring of pathways and transitions to adulthood" (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 94). Using the term *transition* implies an assumption that there is a simple and synchronous move from "youth" to "adult," which often dismisses the complexities and multiple transitions involved. The term "transition to adulthood" connotes that adulthood is a clearly defined status at which one arrives, drawing upon the idea that there is but one transition to adulthood (Wyn & White, 1997). Postmodernists view the concept of transitions as situated rites of passage that are structurally created, maintained by social institutions creating an institutionalized process of growing-up and becoming an adult (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Furstenberg, 2000; Wyn & White, 1997). Drawing from the postmodern perspective, I view the life course as culturally and socially scripted, structured by economic and social resources that make attaining traditional markers of adulthood more difficult to achieve than they have been in the past. In this research, the phrase *transitions to adulthood* is not used to imply there is a destination marked "adulthood." Instead, it is used to refer to and discuss participants' transitions to what they construct as adulthood.

Historical markers of adulthood. In the United States, middle class benchmarks have traditionally been used to represent markers of adulthood (Furstenberg et al., 2004; Rankin & Kenyon, 2008). Young people are socialized to these markers of adulthood from an early age. They are socialized by parents, school systems, and American media to follow a particular path to becoming adult such as finishing school, finding work, leaving home, marrying, and having a child (Waters et al., 2011). There are five historical markers often cited that have been used to delineate the transition to adulthood: (a) completing school, (b) leaving home, (c) beginning one's career, (d) marrying, and (e) becoming a parent (Settersten & Ray, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2011). These markers present a White, middle-class portrait of young adulthood as they do not take into account populations that include high school leavers, youths who are no longer eligible for foster care services, or teenage parents. The percentage of adults in the United States drops drastically when these markers are applied because they are built upon societal expectations often not met within particular social and cultural contexts.

There were two major changes in the twentieth century that impacted work and family life, thus impacting traditional views regarding entry into adulthood (Fussel & Furstenberg, 2005). First, technological innovation soared; "the workplace" was "the engine that" was changing the nature of adult education, and technology" was "its fuel" (Rachal, 1989, p. 7). Attention was drawn to the workforce, the importance of technical education, and the need for increased technical training. Second, and perhaps most important, was the gender revolution, which "lowered barriers for women to enter the workplace" (Fussel & Furstenberg, 2005, p. 46). These two changes led to more men and

women going to school, some for extended periods of time, to receive the training necessary to keep up with advancing technology. Because they were no longer tied to the home and motherhood, the gender revolution led women to prolong their transition to an adulthood that included taking on adult roles such as wife and mother.

Now, in 2011, there is less emphasis put on historical markers of adulthood, and youths are more active participants in constructing their own identities (Rankin & Kenyon, 2008). In some cases, certain cultural groups or subgroups still hold traditional rites of passage. For example, Mexican-American girls might have a Quinceanera, a 15th birthday party marking the transition from childhood to womanhood, or a Bat Mitzvah may be held for a Jewish girl at the age of 12 indicating that she is now responsible for her own actions. Indeed, there are multiple layers in the process of transitioning to adulthood, and there is a need to reorient understandings of transitions to adulthood to those layers that are historically, culturally, politically, and socially situated.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I first provided a brief outline of the history of adult basic education in the United States. Following the historical overview, I presented ways in which adulthood is often constructed through literal definitions and definitions from the field, through theories of adult development, and through age structuring. Finally, I discussed the more recent trend of transitions to adulthood. In the next chapter I present the theoretical considerations and methodological orientations I brought to this project, and the methods used to carry out this research.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methodology for this study. A discussion of the theoretical considerations and methodological orientations that inform this work leads the chapter. This is followed by an outline of the methods of data collection and data analysis used in this study. I explain how I selected research sites and recruited participants, each of whom is introduced in this chapter. The chapter is brought to a close by presenting criteria for establishing trustworthiness and discussing ethical considerations made in the research process.

Theoretical Considerations

Several theoretical considerations influenced my approach to this research. For me, a theoretical consideration is broad and includes methodological, paradigmatic, and theoretical understandings that stem from underlying epistemological and ontological perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Patton, 2002). In this study, I draw from the interdisciplinary perspectives of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984) and critical social theory (Agger, 2006; Crotty, 1998; Denzin, 1986) as a means of attending to personal and political commitments and sharing those commitments with a larger community of readers. I share my commitments with a larger community of readers because my work aims to develop understandings that go beyond discipline boundaries and forage multiple methods and fields of study for ways to approach the social (Agger,

2006).[5] I also look to the work of Anthony Giddens and his theories of structuration (1979, 1984) and modernity (1991). First, I believe that social structures do not exist apart from people, and I believe they are recursively and reflexively reproduced. Second, I contend that in the era of late modernity (Giddens, 1991) it is radical reflexivity that leads to transformation, progress, and the development of self-identity. As I discuss each of these orientations below, each one has informed this research and is tied to my methodological decisions.

Postmodernism. Though postmodernism does not reference any single idea or theory per se, it is included in this section because postmodernism informs my epistemic and ontologic orientation and provides context for my theoretical and methodological orientations in this research. At the most basic level, postmodernism refers to a move beyond modernism (Agger, 2006; Constas, 1998; Crotty, 1998; Denzin, 1986; Everhart, 2004; Lyotard, 1984; Usher et al., 1997). More specifically, postmodernism does not ascribe to modern epistemological claims of truth, certainty, and predictability, but rather commits to ambiguity, relativity, partiality, and particularity (Crotty, 1998), understanding that only situated understandings are produced (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). Taking up a postmodern perspective in this research allowed me to (a) question scientific rationality, universal knowledge claims, and predictive generalizations (Usher et al., 1997), (b) reject grand narratives in favor of understanding local experience

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[5] I want to make a distinction here between social theory and sociological theory. Sociological theory is a more scientific form of theory developed in order to understand and explain society. Social theory, in contrast, stands in opposition to scientific theory and offers a critique of modern society rather than an explanation for it (Allan, 2011; Sanderson, 2005).

(Constas, 1998), (c) attend to the crisis of representation, meaning how researchers re-represent their participants, (Denzin, 1986), (d) be reflexive as researcher (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008), and (e) celebrate difference in a multiplicity of voices (Denzin, 2010; Usher et al., 1997). These are important because through each I am reminded to ask not only, *What am I finding through my research?* but also, *What is happening in my research? What is it doing? Whose story is being told?* With each question, I become more aware that "research is both a constructed and constructing activity" (Usher et al., 1997, p. 208), and I turn my attention to the way in which the world is constructed through the research text I create.

Critical social theory. Like postmodernism, critical social theory is interdisciplinary and pushes back on positivism and its attempt to formulate general understandings and universal truth claims. First, it is important to define what I mean by "critical." The word "critical" when used in relation to research or theory is most often associated with early Marxist theory and the Frankfurt School. Karl Marx argued that capitalism was based "on certain structural factors that create tensions in capitalism, most notably exploitation and overproduction" (Allan, 2011, p. 41) and affected every area of human existence. For Marx, recurring economic cycles generated a small class of bourgeoisie who owned the means of production in capitalism including commodification, industrial production, and private property which, in turn, created class consciousness among and economic revolution among workers once they determine their fate is decided by class position (Allan, 2011; Morrow & Brown, 1994).

The Frankfurt School was started in the early 1920's at the University of Frankfurt in Germany by Felix Weil, who wanted to establish an institution and context for discussing Marxist ideas (Morrow & Brown, 1994). The school focused on Marx's ideology and critical evaluation of capitalism and the state. Members of the Frankfurt School moved to Switzerland, New York, and California to escape the Nazi regime in Germany but some eventually returned to Frankfurt in 1953. Though the Frankfurt School is synonymous with Marx and what was later known as "critical theory," it should be noted that

> unlike Marx, critical theory sees ideological production as linked to culture and knowledge rather than simply class and the material relations to production…and sees ideology as not simply a direct tool of the elite, but, rather, as part of the cultural atmosphere (Allan, 2011, p. 365).

These traditions are politically charged and seek to uncover and identify issues of power and oppression that exist systemically for certain groups and not for others within a capitalist society. In this research, however, "critical" in "critical social theory" is used to refer to a theoretical and methodological approach that acknowledges presuppositions, the nature of how knowledge and reality are constructed, and the reflexivity of the researcher (Morrow & Brown, 1994). "Critical" carries with it the purpose of informing social action with the intent of informing not only those in the academy, but in the field of practice as well.

I take up critical social theory in combination with an interpretive orientation to research, recognizing that knowledge has inherent power (Denzin, 2010), and try to

understand the social through the meaning people construct and attach to it. According to Agger (2006), critical social theorists embrace rigor, invite the political, and respond to class struggle. Moreover, the use of critical social theory aims to bring about social change that starts with the individual and attends to the duality of structure and the social domination and reproduction of structures and institutions that affect the power of agency needed to make change on individual and systemic levels. Because interpretive research views culture as a "complex process of improvisation and seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives" (Denzin, 1999, p. 510), narratives are treated as some degree of truth from a postmodern perspective and in critical social theory. As I attempted to understand how the participants in this research constructed and performed adulthood, I did so through the narratives they produced, which reflect the realities of the discourses in which they operate (Agger, 2006).

The work of Anthony Giddens. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1979, 1984), theory of modernity and self-identity (1991), and concept of "fateful moments" informed this research. For Giddens (1979), society was not made up of objective structures but of structures that are continually socially constructed and reconstructed, which forms the basis for understanding how society exists and how actions, roles, and behaviors are patterned over time. These are interesting concepts to consider when exploring when and how participants in this study perceive they have reached adulthood. Below, I discuss in more detail Giddens' theory of structuration, followed by an outline of his theory of modernity and overview of his concept of fateful moments.

Giddens' theory of structuration. Giddens' (1979) theory of structuration is perhaps his most well known contribution to social theory. Structuration theory explores the relationship between agency and structure—reified structures and individual actions, also referred to as agency. It examines the interaction between structures in society and human agency within larger systems. Giddens (1979, 1984) defined *agency* as action, what a person does or can potentially do, *structure* as the rules and resources under which agency operates such as laws, societal norms, and *systems* as containing not structures themselves but structural properties that reproduce interaction and relationships. Because structure and agency interact across time and space, these two elements socially construct one another in a dual relationship that results in *structuration*, the reproduction of social systems (Giddens, 1979, 1984).

Structuration was also conceptualized by Giddens as including *duality of structure*, "which refers to the fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency" (Giddens, 1979, p. 69). In other words, social structure and agency are recursively and reflexively reproduced because agency is always in relation to structure, and structure is both "enabling and constraining" (Giddens, 1979, p. 69). Agents create structure and at times are constrained by it and moved within the structure by systemic practices already in place. For example, Ferguson (2001) and Mac an Ghaill (1988) reported that in public schools, teachers frequently draw on racially stereotyped "rules" when interacting with Black students and utilize different norms of behavior for boys and girls. The relationship here between structure (stereotyped rules and norms) and agency (teacher-student interaction) is such

that each constructs the other and reproduces systemic inequities in schools. As it relates to this research, the duality of structure is important to consider because the participants, school leavers transitioning as adult learners, were located at the intersection of "structure" and "agency" and moved about within and then out of the educational system. Aside from interaction with social structure elements like race, class, and gender, as youths and school leavers the participants in this study were faced with the societal structures that limit mobility within the education system and the workforce (Simpson & Cieslik, 2007). I am interested in transitions to adulthood, the choices that are made during that process, and the structures that limit those available choices, particularly in terms of education and work.

Also outlined in his theory of structuration was Giddens' (1984) concept of practical and discursive consciousness. Practical consciousness is developed and expressed through what people "know (believe) about social conditions, especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively" (p. 375). This refers to the knowledge that is known about how to exist and behave socially, what is part of a routine and nuanced without necessarily being given discursive meaning. Allan (2011) provided a good example of Giddens' practical consciousness by describing ritualized greetings such as "Hey, how are you?" This type of greeting is something that many people perform, but they cannot articulate why they greet one another in this way. Discursive consciousness is what "actors are able to say or to give verbal expression to about social conditions, especially conditions of their own action" (p. 374). It is how people are able to give an account of their actions and reasons for them (Giddens, 1984),

and what they are able to talk about regarding the society in which they live. The participants' narratives collected for this research are examples of discursive consciousness.

Giddens' (1984) tied consciousness, time and space, and structuration together with what he called *ontological security.* Ontological security is the result of the construction of personal identity in which there is security in the personal reality created (Giddens, 1984). I believe that structure and agency exist with and not apart from one another and that identity is constructed, at least in part, by their duality. However, in terms of youth transitions to adulthood, the question remains whether or not the construction and performance of adulthood are part of practical or discursive consciousness. Moreover, what role, if any, does ontological security have in the construction of adult identity and the performance of adulthood?

Modernity and self-identity. Giddens' (1991) work on modernity and self-identity reconsidered self and society in late modernity and is also relevant to this dissertation research. Giddens posited four elements of modernity: (a) radical reflexivity, (b) separation of time and space, (c) disembedding mechanisms, and (d) globalization (Allan, 2011). The first element—radical reflexivity—is what I focus on here because it refers to (a) monitoring action, and (b) knowledge and meaning. Giddens introduced the idea of "the reflexive project of self" into social theory (Henderson et al., 2007) with his argument that it was no longer possible to expect to reproduce models of adult life. Instead, individuals must begin to invent themselves, deciding who they want to be. Giddens (1991) wrote, "The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is

responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (p. 75). It is through narratives of self, which Giddens defined as "the story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the individual concerned and by others" (p. 244), that participants in this research had the opportunity to reflexively understand the construction and performance of adulthood. Reflexivity as a critical element to Giddens' concept of modernity paralleled my commitment as a researcher to remain reflexive and transparent in my research and also informed my choice to use narrative in this study.

Fateful moments. Because this research sought to capture inaugural moments of entry into adulthood, and in order to better understand the impact these events may have had in the lives of the participants, it is necessary to consider Giddens' concept of "fateful moments," or what Henderson et al. (2007) and Thomson et al. (2002) took up as "critical moments," along with Mezirow's (1981, 1991, 1995) work on perspective transformation, specifically his concept of "disorienting dilemmas." First, for Giddens (1991), fateful moments are highly consequential and potentially empowering experiences in which individuals have to take responsibility for new demands and a potentially new direction. These "fateful moments are transition points that have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual's future conduct but for self-identity" (p. 143).

In adopting Giddens' concept of fateful moments as a theoretical construct, Henderson et al. (2007) and Thomson et al. (2002) used the term "critical moments" to describe moments that either the participants or the researchers regarded as consequential

in the participants' lives. Mezirow (1981, 1991, 1995) posited that transformation begins with a "disorienting dilemma" that subsequently triggers a new experience, be it a new learning experience or redefining the meaning of life, identity or action. His view of a disorientating dilemma was that it is a transition point toward a potentially new way of thinking and being.

In framing this research, I use the term "inaugural moments" to attend to those events participants shared as their entry into adulthood, both consequential in nature, having implications for self-identity, and triggering a new way of thinking about adulthood. Inaugural moments, as I interpret them, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Critique of Giddens. While I am partial to Giddens' work, it is not without critique. In the late 1970's and early 1980's Giddens was an established figure in British sociology (King, 2010). Through his development of structuration theory he sought to explain social reproduction by bringing together functionalist and interactive traditions in a single theoretical framework (Giddens, 1979). Margaret Archer (1982) published the first serious critique of Giddens' work and it remains one of the most insightful (King, 2010). Giddens (1979, 1984) posited that through structure, individual agency was created by the system and that social conditions exist which are greater than the individual. Archer (1982) agreed with Giddens on the latter but rejected his concept of duality of structure. Instead, Archer's approach viewed social structure and human agency as having distinctive purposes and aimed to explore the interaction between the two.

One of the claims made by Archer (1982) is that Giddens' structuration theory contained a central contradiction in claiming that despite structure individuals have the freedom to act in ways different than those set out by the system (Giddens, 1979). She proffered that systems manipulate the "degrees of freedom for action" (Archer, 1982, p. 464). In Giddens' later work when he introduced the reflexive project of self (1991) he separated the individual from structural constraints, giving individuals even more freedom in the agency they choose to take up. This is an important critique because I consider Giddens' structuration theory and later work on modernity and self-identity in this dissertation research. Knowledge of Archer's early critique of Giddens provides a deeper insight into the duality of structure as it relates to individual freedom and opens a space for understanding how participants utilize agency when operating within systems such as school, that produce structural challenges.

Methodological Orientation

Because the aim of this study was to explore the construction and performance of adulthood for 18- to 25-year-old GED students, I chose narrative as the methodological orientation for this research. My primary methodological goal was to produce narratives that drove the theoretical considerations of this research. In this study, narrative provides a way to introduce and re-represent the stories participants shared about their transition to adulthood and their identity as adults. Language is a mode of representation by which we attach meaning to experience (Hall, 1997). I use the term *re-represent* (in various forms) to acknowledge experience cannot be studied directly. Instead, it is studied "through and in its performative representations" (Denzin, 2003b, p.191). Therefore, the participants'

narratives are the first representations of their experiences, and my interpretation is a representation of the first, resulting in re-representation.

Narrative is used across disciplines (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Webster & Mertova, 2007). For me, narrative captures the "what" and the "how" of experience; "what" being the story and "how" meaning how it is narrated, the discourse. I agree with those who use narrative in their professional research and claim that narrative generates understandings of social histories that influence identity and development (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004) and address and characterize the complex nature of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster & Mertova, 2007), but I do not agree with claims that narratives posit a more truthful story of experience (Freeman, 2004). I believe that narrative captures the uncertainty and contradiction of experience that emerges in narration (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and has the potential to reshape discourse (Foucault, 1978) in ways that other methods do not. This is important in this study because through capturing the construction and performance of adulthood in participants' narratives there is potential to emend the historic ways of constructing and understanding adulthood.

Experiences are organized into meaningful episodes primarily through narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995). Because "a person is at once engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4), narrative is a way of creating a space that welcomes marginalized voices (Canagarajah, 1996; Lewis, 2011; Richardson, 1990). Bruner (1991) noted that narrative is a means to attend to the particulars of lived experience as meaning is not necessarily inherent in experience but is

constructed through social discourse. Narrative methodology fits well with the postmodern and interpretive frame for this study because it focuses on the individual and acknowledges the partial nature of knowledge (Lyle, 2009; Packwood & Sikes, 1996). Situating this project in an interpretive frame allowed me to richly describe and draw from participants' narratives, understanding that narratives are always partial and contextual because they put temporal experiences into order and generate personal understandings, which are always open to re-reinterpretations (Usher et al., 1997).

Narrative has been defined multiple ways, and there is some disagreement regarding its definition (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) posited narrative is a means of promoting multiple understandings, discourses, and possibilities. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that narrative is "both a phenomenon and a method" (p. 1) and went on to describe narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding experience…it is stories lived and told" (p. 20). Polkinghorne (1988) referred to narrative as both the process of making a story and the results of the story, and Webster and Mertova (2007) posited that narrative "records human experience through the construction and re-construction of personal stories" (p. 1). Despite the various definitions and understandings of narrative research, narrative is but one way to make meaning from experience, and I consider narrative to be more about understanding story than about method or theory.

There is a distinctly different yet intersecting concept of story, narrative, and narrative inquiry. *Story* comes from the Latin word "histora" (history) and, for me, is the substance of the story, the sequence of events. *Narrative*, coming from the Latin root

"recount," incorporates the story but also includes the senses, movement, discourse, emotion, and other elements involved in telling the story. I contend stories are what draw readers and listeners into the narrative. Stories can be provocative: It is the story embedded within the narrative that keeps readers and listeners coming back for more and diving deeper into the multiple layers and construction of the narrative. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) are more than collecting and re-retelling or re-representing stories. Indeed, they require careful analysis of narrative data against a series of frames, including those of the research participant, the researcher, and the larger cultural narratives in which these individuals are situated (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009). Story, narrative, narrative inquiry, and narrative analysis are interwoven in that interpretations utilize all four concepts in re-retelling.

Narrative as story. McAdams (1993) noted, "Human beings are storytellers by nature" (p. 27). Some stories captivate. Some stories are enticing and powerful. Some have the power to instruct, the power to heal, the power to oppress, the power to empower. Stories provide a way to organize thoughts in a way that is remembered and told (McAdams, 1993). Narrative lends itself to qualitative inquiry in order to capture the rich data within stories because "stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1). I have a personal, political, and social relationship to stories. As a student, instructor, and researcher, I believe our experiences influence how and what we learn, and it is through stories that we make our experiences known.

Stories are "representations of the self … often very powerful stories, which perform a variety of social functions including the construction of selves" (Usher et al., 1997, p. 103). Stories are about events and conditions in people's lives. They are also "part of their self-understanding" (Luttrell, 1997, p. 8). It is my belief that understanding of self and knowledge of the world come through stories told and heard. Storying and storytelling is a tradition that predates written language (Abrahamson, 1998), and multiple truths are contained in stories (Bochner, 2001). Building upon literature from adult development, adult learning, sociology, and youth studies, I am interested in how participants construct and perform adulthood as well as in their stories of inaugural moments as adults and as adult learners. Using narrative can sometimes create spaces for stories to be heard and to honor the emotions, tellings, and hearings of those stories. Through organizing, interpreting, and producing stories, I have the opportunity to be reflexive in my thinking and interpretations.

While much of what I have presented about narrative is positive, I do not want to imply that stories are unconditionally positive and not without discrimination, oppression, or subjugated histories. Narratives are often written by the majority—the victors of history—from a particular viewpoint that favors the victors and are taken up as "official" stories of history (Rozas & Miller, 2009). For example, stories of national identity that present social solidarity in order for nations to carry out large-scale programs such as war and colonization are grand narratives that often hide inequalities and injustices (Allan,

2011). The story of Native Americans in the United States is one that is romanticized in schools and in U.S. history books as a story of equality but, as Grande (2008) pointed out, has been one of cultural domination and material exploitation:

> The miseducation of American Indians precedes the "birth" of this nation. Indeed long before the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired, American education was being conceived as a foundational weapon in the arsenal of American Imperialism. By the mid-18th century, [universities] had all been established with the express purpose of "civilizing" and "Christianizing" Indians. Perhaps the most critical insight to siphon from this history is that the colonialist project was never simply about the desire to "civilize" or even deculturalize indigenous peoples. Rather, it was deliberately designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to indigenous resources [land]. (p. 235)

For Grande, this story of colonization persisted, and she maintained that educational reform that takes up an analysis of colonialist must occur as native students and scholars deserve a pedagogy, Red Pedagogy, which cultivates a sense of agency and "unthinks our colonial roots" (p. 250). Postmodernism posits skepticism toward grand narratives like the one presented above as they are often used to legitimize historical discourse (Lyotard, 1984) and perpetuate the status quo. I maintain that there is much to be learned from stories. I am drawn to stories for the cultural, social, and political reasons as well as the tellings, the performances, the interpretations, and the questions about who gets to take up narrative and in what ways.

Narrative is also a means of pushing back on grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) while moving toward local stories (Bochner, 2001), allowing a way to honor "the particular" (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Noblit, 1999). As a postmodern researcher, I attempt to transcend metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984) by focusing on the diversity of experience in the particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991). The particular can be interpreted many ways, but this research embraces Abu-Lughod's (1991) concept of the particular by not viewing particular as "different" or "the other story" but as a particular experience situated socially, culturally, and historically. It is my belief that through honoring the particular the dominant discourse is challenged. The particular is honored in this research by focusing on those members of a population often excluded from research in adult development and often silenced in their experiences. Moreover, there is agency in narration and in constructing personal meanings of adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). Collecting participants' stories and perceptions of adulthood challenges the White, hetero-normative stages of development and politicized definitions of adulthood so readily accepted in adult education (Knowles, 1973; Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Merriam, Cafarella, & Baumgartner, 2006).

Narrative, identity, and performance. A narrative approach to understanding identity stands in stark contrast to the models of stage development presented earlier but is one that has drawn attention across disciplines, including adult education (Rossiter, 1999; Tennant, 2006). Moving away from the psychological models of identity development, McAdams (1993, 2001) pushed the limits of narrative psychology by adopting a social constructionist position to identity using the life story. He noted that

stories of self are evolving narratives jointly created by the person and by his or her defining culture. An understanding of self is developed through personal narratives (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993; McLean, 2008) as narratives are used to make sense of experience, especially those experiences that counter our expectations (Bruner, 1990). It is with this ability, the ability to explain the self through narratives, that identity takes shape. In the case of this research, it is through their narratives that that participants' performances of adulthood and identities as adults or otherwise were shared.

The "performance turn" (Denzin, 2003a, 2003b; Langellier, 1999; Madison, 2005a, 2005b; Madison & Hamera, 2007, Peterson & Langellier, 2006) offers an understanding of how identity is performed through narrative and provides a new way of experiencing narrative and narrative research: "Performances are embedded in language" (Denzin, 2003b, p. 189). It is through language that we come to understand the meanings attached to particular words within cultural, social, and political contexts (Hall, 1997). With narrative, performance is a matter of making and doing (Denzin, 2003b; Langellier, 1999; Peterson & Langellier, 2006) and is both performance and performative. The former is based on agency, and the latter on existing cultural ideas about gender, race, and class that are tightly bound in structural conditions (Bettie, 2003; Langellier, 1999). Because this project explores both the construction and performance of adulthood from a postmodern perspective, it is important to briefly discuss narrative as performance of identity.

When considering narrative as performance of identity, I move to the ethnographic works of Bettie (2003) and Wilkins (2008) as examples because both

authors posited that identity is always performed and always socially constructed. Bettie's (2003) work in *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity,* described the experiences of young high school women and their performance of identity in terms of class, race and ethnicity, and gender. Wilkins (2008), in *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status,* explored the youth subcultures of goth, evangelical Christianity, and Puerto-Rican wannabehood and the ways subcultures create individual and collective identities. While the works of Bettie (2003) and Wilkins (2008) did not explore adult identity, their work informs my interest in the way personal narratives are used to construct and perform identities (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Stanley & Billing, 2004) of adulthood. The time period between ages 18 and 25 is often associated with "identity phases purportedly aimed at an eventual settled adult identity" (Wilkins, 2008, p. 4). The participants I interviewed provided layered understandings of their identity as it related to adulthood. Some waivered back and forth between being an adult and "getting there" (Carly, Juice), while some did not identify as adults but imagined what their adult identity would be like in a few years. This performance of adult identity can be captured through narrative.

Critique of narrative. Narrative research is often met with resistance by researchers who argue for scientific "neutrality" and "objectivity" (Lather, 1986, p. 186). Narrative inquirers seek to understand experience whereas many positivists and post-positivists seek a description of a reality (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). I acknowledge that positivist and post-positivist interpretations of narrative include criticism regarding the subjectivity of this type of research, the "truth" factor of stories, and the power inherent

in interpretation and re-representation. Nevertheless, narrative is a way of life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The strengths of narrative inquiry include its intricacy as a method (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004) that allows researchers to present lived experience with complexity and richness.

As narrative has recently gained popularity across disciplines, it has also endured criticism. Because narratives are partial and fragmented (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), participants may leave out or obscure aspects of meaning in their stories (Polkinghorne, 2007). Interpretation and re-interpretation, tellings and re-retellings, and readings and re-readings of the narrative can also result in something left untold (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). The partiality and contextuality of narratives beg modernists to question: How can we know if the stories being told are true (Atkinson, 1997)? Such questions illustrate the refusal of individual experience as a valid source of knowledge. There is no way to know if narratives are what realists consider authentic, but it is not facts and truth that narrative inquirers pursue. Rather, it is an "articulation of the significance and meaning of one's experiences" (Bochner, 2009, p. 153). In this research, I attended to how facts are articulated in participants' stories and sought to understand how what are articulated as facts frame the construction and performance of adulthood for participants.

Another critique of narrative is the subjectivity and power deployed through this method. Power plays a part in shaping the telling, hearing, and re-telling of stories. For example, as a researcher, I have the power to create stories from interviews—producing them, editing them, and organizing them from interview responses. I have the power to decide what to include and what to leave out (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This power is

often seen as a lack of objectivity in narrative interpretation and re-representation. Narrative then becomes viewed as problematic (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Polkinghorne, 2007) because it does not offer the neutrality sought in other research paradigms. Critical race theorist Richard Delgado (2000) reminded readers that stories can disrupt discourses and demolish complacency. The power of re-representation can "perpetuate a particular view of reality" (p. 64). Regarding his account of responses to the law school's decision not to hire a Black candidate for a teaching position, he noted:

> The story invites the reader to alienate her/himself from the events described, to enter into the mental set of the teller, whose view is different from the reader's own. The oppositional nature of the story, the manner in which it challenges and rebuffs the stock story, thus causes him or her to oscillate between pole. It is insinuative: At times, the reader is seduced by the story and its logical coherence – it is a plausible counterview of what happened; it has a degree of explanatory power. (p. 69)

As discussed in the positionality section of Chapter One, it is important to reiterate the inherent power and privilege I hold as researcher and being in the "ingroup" [6] in re-representing the stories and experiences of the participants, many of whom are marginalized and stigmatized at the intersection of race, class, and level of education.

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[6] Delgado (2000) referred to the "ingroup" and "outgroup" as a way of locating the majority and minority, respectively. He stated, "the stories or narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as neutral (p. 60).

Next, I outline in detail the methods used in this study including site selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Method

This section begins by describing the method used in this project, including site selection and recruitment efforts. After providing relevant information about the participants, I will explain the data collection and data analysis processes, before closing with a discussion on claims of quality and ethical considerations.

Site Selection

Rivertown is situated on the border of the Appalachian Mountains. The population is approximately 178,874, with a metropolitan area of 698,030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Based on its size, it is considered a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Based on 2009 estimates, 79.7 percent of residents identify as White, and 77 percent over age 25 are high school graduates. The median household income is estimated at $31,500. Because the aim of this study was to explore the construction and performance of adulthood for 18- to 25-year-old GED students, I knew that I needed to start looking for volunteer participants within the area. In order to recruit from any of the local programs, I would need the official support of the program in order to gain access to their students. Recruitment began with a local non-profit community agency, the Adult Literacy Council (ALC), with which I am a local volunteer GED tutor.

The ALC was formed in 1991 as a local, private, independent, not-for-profit organization to provide funding and volunteers to local adult education programs. Working in partnership with area literacy organizations, the goal of the ALC is to “help

provide education and life-skill training to adult students so that they become better workers, parents, and citizens" (ALC Mission Statement). Grants, fundraisers, and individual donations fund programs offered through the ALC. In addition to providing volunteer tutors to local adult literacy programs, the ALC administers their own adult literacy/GED program geared toward low-income adult learners within walking distance of their home. By offering on-site classes, learning has become more accessible to residents of public housing, many of whom have transportation problems that prevent them from utilizing other adult education programs in the community. According to the director, Gail, the organization serves roughly 100 students in classes that it runs directly. Though there is no target age group for the ALC, most students are between the ages of 18 and 35 years old.

In the fall of 2010, I met with Gail and the ALC Volunteer Coordinator, Gretchen. I explicitly described my research project, including the participant population I was seeking and why. During our discussion, I explained that the only requirements to participate were that the student be (a) currently enrolled in a GED program, and (b) between the ages of 18 and 25. No restrictions such as time in the program, years out of school, race, or gender were placed on who could participate in the project. A letter of support was sought in order to begin participant recruitment. Gail and Gretchen agreed, subsequently sending a letter of support and putting me in touch with instructors in the field who had students between the ages of 18 and 25 enrolled in their GED classes. I was able to conduct two pilot interviews in the winter of 2010-2011. Honoring my commitment to remain reflexive throughout this process, after conducting the pilot

interviews I reflected upon my assumptions regarding this project as well as on my methodological orientation and theoretical considerations in preparation to develop a proposal for this dissertation project. These assumptions are explicated in the positionality section presented earlier in Chapter One.

To me, recruitment efforts in the spring of 2011 seemed extremely slow. Classes with the ALC were low on enrollment, and the participants who did volunteer either did not show up for our scheduled interview, or I was unable to reach them via the phone numbers they had provided. Because recruitment efforts were not going as planned, I was becoming concerned that there might not be enough participants for my project, so I considered gaining access to additional GED programs. Age diversity was a concern if I only recruited from ALC classes because students in classes at the ALC were at the top of the target age range (23 to 25 years old), and I hoped to include younger participants as well.

Considering access to additional GED programs, I went back to old connections made with Pathways. The target age group at Pathways is 17 to 21years old, and I decided to contact them because their students were within the target age group for this study. A year prior to beginning this project, I had visited the Pathways program regarding volunteer opportunities. Having not been in touch with the program director since that time, I was initially apprehensive about approaching Pathways regarding support for my dissertation research.

Founded in 1981, Pathways operates on government funding and external grants. Though Pathways is open to any adults seeking adult basic education, the program targets

17- to 21-year-olds due to the primary funding sources. Pathways is a small program and its mission is to provide opportunities for students to achieve educational and employment-related goals. According to the Pathways director, Elizabeth, a few years ago the program served approximately 125 students per year, but over the last two years shifts in funding have limited services to only 70 students who are often referred by informed parents, friends, social workers, the school system and even courts. More than 50 percent of students who attend classes at Pathways receive their GED.

I met with Elizabeth in April 2011 and, as I had done with the ALC in the fall of 2010, openly described my research interests, this particular project, and my reasons for doing this kind of research. Because Pathways caters to 17- to 21-year-old students, I was also very candid about the why I was seeking the organization's support. I explained my anxiety regarding participant recruitment and, as with the ALC, explained the requirements to participate without putting any restrictions such as time in the program, years out of school, race, or gender on who could participate. Elizabeth was on board and toward the end of our meeting told me that Pathways had been in existence for 30 years and that she had been there for 15 of those. "In that time," she said, "You are the first person that actually wants to do research with our students. You're the only one who has ever wanted to talk to them." "You're right on track," she remarked. Her comments confirmed for me the importance of this research and the meaningful potential it held for adult education programs and students.

With Pathways' support, this research project really began to take shape. In late May 2011 I found out the ALC was closing most of its classes for the summer, including

the one where I was a volunteer tutor. The ALC would be reopening those classes in late August when K-12 students returned to school. This news felt like a roadblock to recruitment efforts with the ALC. There was going to be one class run by the ALC over the summer, and I might be able to recruit participants there. However, knowing that enrollment is typically lower in adult basic education classes in the summer due to participation barriers including child care, transportation, or even dispositional barriers (Beder, 1990; Quigley, 1997), I was not optimistic. I managed to recruit only one participant, aside from the two pilot participants earlier in the year, who was a student in the summer ALC program. All other participants were recruited from Pathways.

Participants

Following letters of support from both the ALC and Pathways, as well as gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, I contacted instructors referred to me by Gail and Gretchen at the ALC to find out if they had any students enrolled who were between the ages of 18 and 25. I asked to visit their classes to recruit participants. Elizabeth and Caitlyn helped me identify students in their program who might be interested in volunteering. They identified potential participants between the ages of 18 and 25 and currently enrolled in a GED program. Because attendance tends to be sporadic during the summer, Caitlyn and Elizabeth contacted me if students attended class who were eligible to participate. Once contacted, I would visit the site and approach the student about participating in the project. Caitlyn and Elizabeth's help identifying eligible participants per the guidelines I had stated when seeking the organization's support was invaluable. Without their help data collection may have been drawn out over

a longer period of time, which would not have been productive for the research process and could have been disruptive to the learning environment provided at Pathways.

An informal recruitment script (Appendix A) was used to explain the project to potential volunteer participants, and each participant signed a letter of informed consent (Appendix B). The recruitment script was developed with the suggestions of one of my committee members. In order to ensure that participants in this project were privy to how their stories would be used, I was intentionally transparent in my recruitment script regarding the intent of this research and how I hoped to use and disseminate the information they provided in their interviews.

Using criterion sampling, which requires participants to meet certain pre-determined criteria (Patton, 2002), I interviewed participants aged 18 to 25 for several reasons. First, the Workforce Investment Act defines an "adult" as an individual who is 18 years of age or older (WIA, 1998, Title II, Section 101); second, age 25 is the benchmark for many adult educators when identifying non-traditional adult students (Kasworm, 2010); and third, but perhaps most salient, age 18 to 25 has been referred to as a the period of youth transition when people are caught between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006a). Though programs allow students age 16 and over to enroll, I made the decision to recruit participants between 18 and 25 years old in order to avoid any complications due to Institutional Review Board requirements for conducting research with minors. The participants were male and female GED students, aged 18 to 25, who were currently enrolled in a local GED program. Demographic information was collected on each participant before beginning the interviews (Appendix

C). The pseudonym of each participant as well as the demographic information (i.e., age, gender, and race) provided by the participants themselves is included here (Table 1).

Pseudonym selection. Throughout this project I remained sensitive to the power that is inherent in naming (Bourdieu, 1991), and thus I invited each participant, as well as each staff member at both sites, to choose their own pseudonyms. I also asked the staff at each site to choose the pseudonym for their respective organization. Some of the participants took longer to choose a name for themselves than others. A few participants, when asked to select a pseudonym, responded with "Can't I just use my real name?" or "Well, everybody calls me [nickname] so can I use that?" I did not allow participants to use their real names; in the case of the participants who wanted to use a nickname, the decision was left up to the participant after I explained that confidentiality was something I was obligated to uphold in the consent form and that I could not guarantee complete anonymity if they chose to use a nickname. Most of the participants came to their decisions relatively quickly after a few brief moments of thinking about names and saying ones they were considering aloud. The sites, on the other hand, took much more time to consider a name that would be representative of their respective programs.

Introduction to the participants. From the onset of this project, I struggled with how to introduce the reader to the participants I interviewed. When I went back to my research journal, I was reminded of the tension I experienced in my own language use when it came to describing the participants. For example, realizing that "naming is itself a form of power" (Valentine, 1998, 3.1), I spent much time throughout this project considering how to refer to the participants in this study. I did not feel I could refer to all

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Age when left school	Last grade completed	Gender	Race	Children Y (#)[a] or N	Employed Y or N	Economic Status
Alan	19	17	11th	Male	African American	N	N	Low-Income
Booman	19	17	11th	Male	African American	N	Y	Middle Class
Blacq'Barbii	19	15	10th	Female	African American	Y (2)	N	Low-Income
Carly	19	17	10th	Female	White	N	N	Low-Income
Jack	18	17	10th	Male	African American	N	N	Upper Middle Class
JeVaunte	19	18	11th	Male	African American	N	N	Low-Income
Juice	19	18	11th	Female	African American	Y (1)	Y	Low-Income
Kayla	22	17	10th	Female	African American	Y (2)	Y	Low-Income
Lisa	18	16	10th	Female	African American	Y (1)	N	Low-Income
Marie	25	17	10th	Female	White	Y (2)	N	Low-Income
Matt	19	18	11th	Male	White	Y (2)	Y	Low-Income
Susan	25	17	10th	Female	African American	Y (3)	N	Low-Income

[a] Number in parentheses indicates number of children the participant has.

the participants as "adults" as not all of them identified that way. How should I refer to the participants who did not identify as adults? I labored over word choice when writing about them and discussing them in this project. I found myself often using language regarding the participants and my research that drew upon the dominant discourses in adult education and adult development such as "young adult," "teen," and "adolescent." This helped me to realize I am always already a part of the discourses, practices, and structures that I interrogate (Habermas, 1973).

Frustration set in with the realization that the process of naming the participants would lead to renaming and a new rendering of interpretations. The language I use as a researcher, whether in my journal, my dissertation, or in my speech, is an important aspect of naming that brings with it power and suggested interpretations (Usher et al., 1997). Therefore, instead of naming the participants, I decided to introduce each participant individually based upon the demographic information he or she provided. The labels used in each description (e.g. adult, adolescent, etc.) are from the words of the participant and how he or she self-identified. Other constructions and descriptions are my own and come from field notes taken during each interview. The following are introductions to each participant.

Alan. Alan, an African American male, age 19, left school at age 17 in the 11th grade. When we met, he identified as unemployed and low-income. He said that because he has been taking care of himself his entire life, "Right now, yeah, I consider myself an adult."

Blacq' Barbii. Blacq' Barbii, an African American female, aged 19 and the mother of two children, left school when pregnant with her first child at the age of 15 while in the 10th grade. Blacq' Barbii reported she was unemployed, lived with her parents and her children, and considered herself to be low-income. When asked if she considered herself an adult, her immediate response was unwavering, "Not at all."

Booman. Booman, an African American male, age 19, left school at the age of 17 in the 11th grade. At the time of our interview, he lived with a roommate, worked full-time, and considered himself to be middle class. When asked if he considered himself an adult, he remarked, "I do consider myself an adult. I just need to grow up some more." Booman earned his GED shortly after we completed our interview.

Carly. Carly, a 19 year-old White female, left school in the 10th grade at age 17 and identified as low income when we met. Carly described herself as outgoing but not an adult yet. "I'm getting there," she admitted, "I'm confused about that because I do consider myself still a teenager because I am 19, and, sometimes, I do wanna hang out with friends…And, I know that if you're an adult, you hardly have time to do that." Carly earned her GED in the weeks following our interview.

Jack. Jack, an 18 year-old African American male, completed the 10th grade and left school when he was 17. At the time of our interview, Jack identified as upper middle class and lived with his parents. Jack saw himself as on the path to adulthood but admitted he was "trying to get there." He remarked, "Fully no. No, I am not fully an adult…I do make decisions on my own…. I don't have full responsibility of things yet.

I'm not on my own." Jack earned his GED in the weeks shortly after completing our interview.

JeVaunte. JeVaunte, an African American male, age 19, left school in the 11th grade as soon as he turned 18. When we met, JeVaunte lived with his mother and identified as low-income. He went back and forth on whether he regarded himself as an adult: "I'm an adult by my age, but by my mentality I still like to play and stuff."

Juice. Juice, an African American female, aged 19 and with one child, left school when she was 18 and in the 11th grade. On her demographic form, Juice stated she was employed and considered herself as low-income. She said she does not feel like an adult but followed up with, "I'm mature enough to handle my business and do whatever I gotta do, as an adult…Well, I'm about there, but it's just some stuff I know I gotta do to myself to make me official."

Kayla. Kayla, a 22 year-old African American female and mother of two children, left school at age 17 in the 10th grade. At the time of our interview, she identified as low-income and unemployed. Kayla readily admitted she was an adult and remarked, "I feel good as an adult…sometimes I have them stages where I want to go back to teenager and turn stuff around though."

Lisa. Lisa, an African American female and 18-year-old mother, identified as low-income when we met. Lisa left school the same day she ran away from her foster care family at age 16 and in the 10th grade. When I asked Lisa if she thought she was an adult, she flatly responded, "No," then she elaborated, "Because the simple fact, I'm not stable, and I'm not taking care of myself right now. I'm not taking care of my child. I

am pretty much still in school trying to get my school out of the way." Lisa received her GED a few months after we completed our interview.

Marie. Marie, a White female, age 25 and mother to two children, left school at age 17 in the 10th grade. At the time of our interview, Marie was not employed and considered herself to be low-income. She referred to her biological age when asked if she considered herself an adult, "Oh, yes. I'm 25, but I feel a lot older."

Matt. Matt, a White male, age 19, and the father of two children, left school in the 11th grade the day he turned 18. When we met, Matt was working his first job and identified as low-income. When asked if he considered himself an adult, he replied, "Agewise and everything, yeah, but in my head I still wanna be young and do what I wanna do and stuff but I just can't." He was the only male I interviewed who had children. Matt received his GED in the months following our interview.

Susan. Susan, a 25-year-old African American mother of three was one of the two oldest participants I interviewed. She left school at the age of 17 in the 10th grade. When I interviewed Susan, she was looking for a job and considered herself to be low-income. She was definitive in her response to the question, "Do you consider yourself an adult?" Without hesitation she said, "Yes…Because I take care of home. I cook. I clean. I do laundry. I pay bills."

Data Collection

In total, I interviewed 12 participants, three from the ALC, including the two pilot interviews, and nine from Pathways. The interviews were conducted between April and September of 2011 (except for the month of July). I met with the ALC students at their

class locations and searched for a quiet place to conduct the interviews. Elizabeth and Caitlyn with Pathways were so gracious that I often stopped by unannounced to see what students were there and if any of them were interested in participating. I made myself available during the times that classes were held at Pathways, clearing my schedule nearly every weekday morning so that I could arrange interviews with students. On occasion, Caitlyn would email or call and let me know that potential students were present that day. This was extremely helpful because both Elizabeth and Caitlyn had told me that knowing who was going to be in attendance on what days was often hit or miss. Having Elizabeth and Caitlyn help me to identify potential participants at Pathways was helpful and saved time in the recruitment process.

The interview space. Interviews with the 12 participants from two sites took place in four different interview spaces. The ALC students were interviewed in one of two ALC locations. Because the classroom spaces in these locations were not private enough to be conducive to interviewing, a different space was sought. The first space was the location of an ALC class that took place in a community senior center. There was a private L-shaped room downstairs used for arts and crafts where I interviewed two participants. When meeting with a participant at this location, we each sat at one of two of the arts and crafts tables across from one another. The room was lined with sewing machines and baskets of knitting yarn, and craft supplies were stuffed in plastic bins on the bookshelf. It was private and quiet except for the hum of the heater we turned on upon arrival and the noise coming from the men playing pool directly above us. The second space was another ALC class that met at the tenants' association building in a

local public housing complex. I interviewed the third participant from the ALC here in the foyer of the building. The foyer is adjacent to the classroom and only semi-private as one of the two entrances to the class is located there. Despite the fact that the space was not completely private, we were only interrupted by people entering or leaving a couple of times, and neither interruption affected our ability to carry on with the interview. The room had a large cherry-stained wooden desk and some folding metal chairs. The desk was pushed up against the wall by the door so we were not able to sit across from one another. Instead, we sat side-by-side at the desk turned slightly toward one another with our backs to the door.

The other two interview spaces were at Pathways where Elizabeth made sure there was space to use for interviews. The first interview at Pathways took place in the original location, upstairs. An entry from my research journal describes the space:

> May 16, 2011
>
> *When I arrived at Pathways today and walked up the house, the site looked different to me than before. I know the program has been there for 30 years, but the house looked old and incredibly run down today. I immediately noticed the tarp on the roof and paint peeling away from the wood on the front. Upon entering, I was greeted by Caitlyn and noticed there were three students present. It seemed smaller than I remembered and more crowded with two tables, Caitlyn's desk, supplies, a whiteboard, bookshelves, etc. all in one main room when you enter. I spotted [the participant] and we reacquainted ourselves, having met a few days earlier. Elizabeth told us we could interview upstairs in an*

> *unoccupied office. Apparently, it was the only space upstairs that didn't have part of the ceiling caving in. Much of the community suffered from severe storm damage in April 2011 and Pathways seemed to be no exception. The house was old and creaky with a musty smell that overwhelmed me when I climbed the stairs. The office was to the left at the top of the stairs. There were windows along the wall opposite the door, one desk and a narrow space on the other side of it.*

Other interviews at the Pathways original location took place downstairs in a room off the main classroom. There was no door, but there was a large, heavy, grey vertical standing easel with a flip chart on it that I managed to push in front of the door to provide more privacy during the interviews. Eventually the roof did cave in at Pathways, and the program was forced to move over the summer. The new Pathways location reminded me of a corporate suite in a small office complex. The main classroom was large, perhaps 20-feet-by-30-feet, with eight tables (two on each side) that formed a square in the middle of the room so that all the students faced one another. Off the main room were private offices, a welcome area with a reception desk, and two rooms used for testing and as computer labs. Interviews at the new location took place in one of the computer labs. The labs were small—one table, four chairs, four laptops and a bookcase filled the room. The participants and I always sat across the table from one another in this space.

The interviews. As stated earlier, demographic information was collected on each participant prior to beginning the interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) was used (Glesne, 2010; Merriam, 2009) in order to allow me, as the researcher, to "respond to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on

the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Having a semi-structured interview protocol guided each interview but did not limit the direction the interview could take, allowing me to capture participant stories**.** In developing the interview protocol I was concerned that I might run the risk of losing valuable information by trying to "get through" the interview questions or trying to stick to closely to the protocol. With this in mind, I was committed to remaining flexible in each interview so that I might capture the richest data. In each interview I utilized patient probing, following up each question and participant response with additional questions that sought further detail and description about what had been said (Glesne, 2010; Roulston, 2010). This method allowed the participants to lead the direction of the interview and allowed me, as the interviewer, to refer to the protocol only as needed. The interviews were digitally recorded. At the end of each primary interview, I asked the participant if I could contact her/him again to go over the interview transcript and ask any additional questions I might have. Each participant agreed.

Participant interviews were transcribed and interpreted as they were collected. A transcription company transcribed each interview, having signed a confidentiality agreement before beginning transcription. Some qualitative researchers might contend that transcription is the first step of interpretation (Kvale, 1996; Ochs, 1979). Though I did not transcribe the interview data myself, I still felt connected to the data due to the short turnaround time for transcription. Each interview was uploaded on the same day the interview took place, and within three days I had a completed transcript. After receiving the completed transcript, I listened to each interview while reading the respective transcripts to check for accuracy.

Following each primary interview and after transcripts were complete, an attempt was made to contact each participant for a member-checking interview (Glesne, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Roulston, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). While the attempt to contact each participant was made either by phone or text message, interviews were not possible because the participants either did not return my phone calls or text messages or, in a few cases, the participant did not return to class. When I was able to reach participants, a time was arranged to meet them for a second interview.

Five of the twelve participants were available for a second interview, and each of these interviews took place in the same location as the primary interview. The first thing I did in each member-checking interview was to ask the participant to look over, in as much detail as they wanted, the transcript from our first interview so that they could "judge the accuracy and credibility" of the transcript (Creswell, 2007, p. 208), asking if there was anything he or she did not want included. In the interviews I conducted, each participant agreed to keep the transcript as it was, without changes. Once we had agreed upon the transcript, I began with follow-up questions. I drew upon Rubin and Rubin's (2005) suggestions on ways to conduct member-checking with follow-up interviews by going back for more detail on (a) partial/incomplete stories, (b) terms mentioned but not defined or without examples, (c) concepts implied but not stated, and (d) questions not answered or answered evasively. I found that the five participants with whom I had a second interview were willing to share more, and the second interview provided deeper insight into their particular experiences, understandings, and construction of adulthood.

Data Analysis

Complexity exists in analyzing narrative data, and there are unlimited approaches to analysis (Ollernshaw & Creswell, 2002). For this reason, my goal was to conduct data analysis in a way that could be described methodically and in a way that demonstrated rigor in qualitative research. I carried out multiple levels of analysis across the data set, which included interview transcripts, field notes, and my research journal. In the formal data analysis there were five distinct steps. Each step included units of analysis that are explained in more detail in this section.

After receiving the completed interview transcripts from the transcription company, I read each one two to three times while listening to the corresponding digitally recorded interview. This process allowed me to review and edit each transcript to ensure verbatim transcriptions were created and that no identifying information was included. Pseudonyms were created for references to places, people, and programs that were connected to the participants in any way. Reading and listening to the transcripts simultaneously was my first formal step in the interpretive process. Doing so gave me the opportunity to note places where I wanted to know more and needed clarification from the participants. In those cases I went back to participants who were available for follow-up interviews and asked for more information or clarification on particular segments of the transcript. Throughout this first step, I pre-coded (Saldaña, 2009) segments of data that stood out to me by making notes and reflections on what I found most powerful in the participants' words.

While my instinct was to immediately code the interview data using descriptive and in vivo codes, which is explained in more detail below, I found I was overwhelmed by the richness of language used by each participant and the multiple stories within each narrative. I decided to take a more systematic approach to the data in order to make it more manageable for me in the coding, analysis, and interpretation process (Riessman, 2008; Wolcott, 1994). In order to do this, my second step was to sort the data chronologically. Because stories do not always appear in chronological order (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Liamputtong, 2009), I combed each interview for the chronological story of life experience as it related to the performance and construction of adulthood and inaugural moments of adulthood. This resulted in a more linear narrative for each participant, which I found more manageable and focused for coding and in-depth analysis.

Because one aim of this study was to capture inaugural moments of adulthood for those participants who identified as adults, in step three I began to look for stories of inaugural moments of adulthood in each participant's narrative, an example of what Henderson et al. (2007) and Thomson et al. (2002) referred to as "critical moments." I identified these stories in two ways: (a) through responses to particular questions on the interview protocol (i.e. When do you think you became an adult?), and (b) by identifying terms and phrases that signaled, for example, entry into adulthood (i.e. "I became an adult when…"). Once I had identified these inaugural moments, often not contiguous but spread throughout the narrative, I used Labov's (1972) model of structured narrative

analysis to code, analyze, and interpret the participant's stories of inaugural moments of adulthood.

Labov's (1972) work, *Language and the Inner City,* examined the Black English vernacular of youths in south-central Harlem and other inner-city neighborhoods through long-term participant observation of and individual interviews with teenage peer groups. Building upon the earlier work of Labov and Waletzky (1967), Labov (1972) identified sequences and structural parts of narratives that recur across stories about experience. In order to do this, Labov identified relevant clauses, preserving line numbers from the original transcript as well as original speech. He then discarded superfluous asides in order to analyze the selected segments of text in terms of their function in the overall narrative.

Labov's (1972) model of structured narrative analysis uses a chronology of events to construct a narrative from data (Riessman, 1993, 2008) and "allows topics and voices to be included in qualitative research that might be missing otherwise" (Riessman, 2008, p. 80). The model includes six categories: *abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution,* and *coda*. Each of these categories serves to address a different question about narrative structure, fulfilling a different function in a story (Labov, 1972). My interpretation of Labov's (1972) model includes each of the six categories, an example of the narrative question the category addresses, and the category's role in the narrative (Table 2). Using this model as a third step in my analysis process allowed me to identify fairly well-developed narratives of inaugural moments with a beginning, middle, and end. Labov's method allowed me to identify narrative components common across

accounts of inaugural moments of adulthood. These structured narratives were coded by hand to note similarities between them and to identify moments of complicating action or tension in story. Chapter Five presents those moments by discussing similarities in structure between each narrative.

Table 2.
Interpretation of Labov's (1972) Model of Structured Narrative Analysis

Category	Narrative Question	Role in the Narrative
Abstract	What is this story about?	Introduces the listener to what the story is about.
Orientation	Who is the story about? When and where did it take place?	Identifies the time, place, people, and events in the story.
Complicating Action	What happened next?	The body of the narrative that provides the sequences of events for the story.
Evaluation	So what?	Makes the point of the story clear and focuses on the narrator's interpretation, experience, and feelings of the events.
Resolution	How does it end?	Signals the end of the story.
Coda	What does it mean?	Brings the listener back to the point where the story began.

The fourth step in the analysis process was to carry out a form of thematic analysis. I was primarily interested in "generating thematic categories across individuals," while keeping "individual stories preserved…and the work is located in the narrative research tradition" (Riessman, 2008, p. 62). To do this, the process involved

uploading the electronic sanitized data set to Atlas.ti™, a qualitative data analysis software package I used to organize and systematically go through the data. To do this I converted each chronological narrative assembled earlier from .doc format to .txt format in order to upload it to Atlas.ti™. As I read and re-read the data, I began to code words and phrases using descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009), highlighting the text in the transcript and creating a code for the highlighted portion of text (Appendix F). In taking up coding as an interpretive act, I approached the coding process inductively and made use of analytic memos in Atlas.ti™ "to document and reflect on" my "coding process and code choices" and "how the process of inquiry" was "taking shape" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 32). The memos and codes were attached to segments of data. A code is often "a short word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" to qualitative data (Saldaña, 2009, p. 2). I referred to my research questions to guide the coding process and used descriptive and in vivo codes to organize my data and to identify and represent themes and patterns in each individual narrative and across the participants' stories. The research questions for this study were:

1. What is the lived experience of adult basic education students, age 18 to 25, transitioning as adult learners?
2. How do 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood?

When considering the first research question, I thought about the transcripts as a group and looked for a common story in each narrative. Each narrative was grounded in

the experiences of leaving high school and enrolling in a GED program, which were experiences shared among participants. I coded the interviews related to leaving high school and enrolling in a GED program in order to gain a better understanding of the lived experience shared between the participants as they transitioned as adult learners.

The second research question led me to look specifically for descriptions of construction and performance of adulthood. These descriptions "met specific criteria" (Riessman, 2008, p. 60) for construction and performance. Construction of adulthood referred to what defined an adult and what a person needed to do to be considered an adult. For example, many of the participants in this study constructed an adult as someone who was "financially independent." Performance, on the other hand, referred to what actions the participant did or did not consider adult actions and carried out themselves. In this study, "taking care of my kids" (Kayla, Matt) and "paying bills" (Blacq' Barbii, Susan) are two examples that were coded as performance of adulthood.

In the fifth step of analysis, I used a modified version of Anfara, Brown, and Mangione's (2002) model of code mapping data iterations in order to disclose my systematic process of analysis using descriptive and in vivo codes (Appendix G). There were multiple iterations of data. The first iteration of data included open-coding using descriptive and in vivo codes of segments of data of interest. During this coding process I noted via analytic memos connections between codes and potential themes. The second iteration involved pattern coding, the combination and merging of first iteration codes (Saldaña, 2009). To conduct pattern coding, I relied upon earlier created analytic memos attached to each code or segment of data. By reading each chronological narrative again

and working with the data coded in the first iteration, I was able to merge codes that co-occurred in the data set or were similar. Using pattern coding allowed me to see broad patterns that were present in the data. In the third iteration of data I constructed code families and networks in Atlas.ti™, which acted as a functional tool for grouping codes and creating a visual network for the codes and how they were related to one another. In this iteration I returned to my research questions and created code families based upon broad patterns that recursively appeared in the narratives and spoke to the research questions. The networks created show the relationship between particular code families. The code families for construction and performance of adulthood displayed themes present in each family. After identifying broad patterns across the data, I began to construct the findings. As I did so, I thought about what I had "found," remembering that there is always the possibility of a different interpretation. These iterations do not represent all the iterations in their entirety but are representative of the rigor exerted in the coding and analysis process.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Terms like *validity* and *reliability* permeate social science research (Kvale, 1995). Despite the fact that some qualitative researchers (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Freeman et al., 2007; Lather, 1986; Lincoln, 1995; Moss, 2004; Polkinghorne, 2007) have explored different ways of evaluating postpositivist and postmodern qualitative research, even using terms such a *trustworthiness* and *credibility*, there still seems to be a inclination to produce standards of evidence that meet "validity" criteria and positivist notions of legitimate research. For postmodern researchers like myself, there are multiple ways of

knowing, multiple truths, and multiple realities. Therefore, the concept of "validity indicates a firm boundary line between truth and nontruth" (Kvale, 2005, p. 21). Rather than supporting a line of truth and nontruth, it is my belief that authenticity and rigor represent quality qualitative research, which in turn points to the trustworthiness of the work. However, despite my position on the validity of the validity question (Kvale, 2005), I recognize that there are expectations held in the larger community of researchers and the academy and that within the academic community researchers are expected to establish trustworthiness or "validity" in research. In my attempt to do so, I used Tracy's (2010) *Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research* to establish trustworthiness for my readers: (a) Worthy topic, (b) Rich rigor, (c) Sincerity, (d) Credibility, (e) Resonance, (f) Significant contribution, (g) Ethical, and (h) Meaningful coherence (Appendix H).

Worthy topic. Tracy (2010) defined a worthy topic as one that is relevant, timely, significant, or interesting. The topic of this research is worthy in the field of adult education, particularly adult basic education. Investigating the construction and performance of *adulthood* adds to current discussions regarding youths in adult basic education programs. One example of this is Issue 24 of *The Change Agent* (2012), a social justice newspaper for adult basic education students and practitioners. Because more and more young people (ages 16 to 24) are in ABE, this issue focuses on youth in ABE and provides a forum for student voices to be heard regarding shifting dynamics in their ABE programs and classes.

Rich rigor. Though "rigor does not guarantee a brilliant final product" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841), it does add to the quality of research. This research is marked with rigor not only through the number of interviews conducted and the care and practice of data collection and analysis, but through the richness of descriptions and explanations and the use of theoretical considerations and social theory.

Sincerity. For me, authenticity is achieved through researcher transparency and disclosure of position within their research. This is what Tracy (2010) called "sincerity." Throughout this research, I have made every attempt to be as transparent as possible with the participants, my audience, and myself. I have stated my positionality and made clear to the research sites and participants my reasons for wanting to conduct this research. Moreover, I have continually acknowledged the subjective, partial, and constructed nature of my interpretations and carried out regular and recursive reflection on my position as researcher, shifting interpretations, and understandings of the research process.

Credibility. According to Tracy (2010), "*credibility* refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" (p. 842). Though my attempt to systematically outline the methods used to collect and analyze data is an important part of the validation process, it is also critical take steps to verify my findings. As I interpreted the data, noting multiple iterations of data and utilizing analytic memos, I simultaneously sought ways to "validate" my findings. I went to existing literature to verify claims, shared my claims with the program staff at Pathways and, when possible, I went back to the participants to get their critique of my interpretations. The script presented in Chapter

Four was read by a group of GED students in the form of a reader's theatre, and their feedback, reactions, and critique were noted. Reader evaluation and feedback is something I value. Elizabeth and Caitlyn, the program staff members at Pathways, stated early on that they would like to read what I was writing. Likewise, I wanted to know what practitioners in the field felt about my work and how they were or were not able to connect with it. As this dissertation writing emerged, sections were sent to Elizabeth and Caitlyn in password-protected documents via email; both offered feedback via email. In addition to sharing my work with participants and program staff over the course of one year, I asked committee members and colleagues to review my developing work and offer feedback on the ways in which I re-represented and shared my interpretations and understandings.

Resonance. *Resonance* is used to refer to evocative re-representation, transferability, and naturalistic generalization (Tracy, 2010). My aim was to create a space for stories from a diverse and often overlooked group of adult learners to be heard. I experimented with alternative forms of re-representation, including ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005) and poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997). The stories told here, along with my interpretations, honor the particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991); however, though this research was not conducted for generalizability or transferability, it has the potential to resonate with adult basic education students, instructors, practitioners, and program planners and lends itself to multiple interpretations and extrapolations for personal resonance.

Significant contribution. It is hoped that this research will make a significant contribution to the field of adult education and be picked up by researchers who study youth sociology, transitions to adulthood, and human development. The potential exists to contribute to adult development literature by exploring social constructions of adulthood from an adult education student perspective, which is often left out of adult education literature.

Ethical. Throughout this project, I adhered to and addressed ethical obligations relevant to this research and was mindful of the participants, the research sites, and my own assumptions. I maintained a commitment to researcher transparency and avoided exploitation of the participants. I sought to remain reflexive regarding the work I was doing and in my re-representations by acknowledging the power that I carried with me in each interview. These aspects are included in the next section of this dissertation, "Ethical Considerations."

Meaningful coherence. Studies that are meaningfully coherent interconnect research design, conceptual frameworks, data collection, and data analysis. Tracy (2010) posited that

> meaningfully coherent studies (a) achieve their stated purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings. (p. 848)

In this research, data collection and analysis was centered on the stated research questions to assist meeting the stated purpose of the study. Situated in a postmodern and interpretive framework and using narrative inquiry to guide interpretations, this work emphasizes social construction, multiple realities, multiple truths, and the partiality and fragmentation of narratives by connecting field literature, the stated research questions, theoretical considerations, findings and interpretations for the reader.

Using criteria set out by Tracy (2010) is but one way to demonstrate the language of validity and trustworthiness often expected in research. I decided to model my claims of quality research on Tracy's work because the eight points she identified are markers that employ language commonly found in a variety of fields of research and create the prospect of "dialogue with power holders who might otherwise regard qualitative research as just a good story" (p. 849).

Ethical Considerations

There are always ethical choices a researcher has to make (Ellis, 2007; Li, 2008). Throughout this project, I sought to adhere to and address ethical obligations relevant to this research and to be mindful of the participants, the research sites, and my own assumptions. I saw myself as entering into an agreement with the participants to be "ethically and morally present in each participatory moment of the research process" (Duncan & Watson, 2010). This pertained not only to the data collection stage, but to the analysis and dissemination stages of this project as well (Elliott, 2005; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). My foremost commitment came with protecting the participants and the sites from which they were recruited. Honoring this commitment, I adhered to all of the

guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Tennessee. Everyone who handled the data in any way signed a pledge of confidentiality to protect the participants (Appendix E), whether a transcriptionist or research group member. Location names, schools, and names of friends and family were also changed to adhere to my commitment to participant confidentiality.

I came to this research agreeing with Macfarlane (2010) "that front-ended ethical approval (IRB) never fully captures the uncertainty and unpredictable nature of the research process itself" (p. 26) and that informed consent is premised on the otherness of the research participant and the position of the researcher. However, understanding that informed consent was necessary to protect myself as researcher and those being interviewed, data collection did not begin until after I had acquired letters of support from both sites and informed consent forms had been signed by each participant. My goal was to remain ethical in terms of (a) transparency, (b) reflexivity, and (c) representation through the research process (Duncan & Watson, 2010). I took several steps to make sure I was engaging in ethical research practice throughout this process.

First, I upheld my commitment to the transparency of the process and sought to avoid exploitation of the participants. I shared my personal and professional reasons for wanting to carry out this research with each research site as well as with the participants. Questions participants had at any time during the course of this project were answered directly. After the first interview with a participant was conducted, I conducted a member-checking interview in which the participant was given the chance to read his or her transcript and make any changes. From an ethical stance, conducting these member-

checking interviews and giving the participants a chance to read their own transcripts helped draw the participants in as "active subjects within the research process" and gave them the opportunity "to select what they believe to be the most salient information regarding the complexity of their lives" (Elliott, 2005, p. 135). It also allowed the participants to see that, in fact, their words had been transcribed verbatim.

Second, I was reflexive about the work I was doing. I acknowledged the power that I carried with me in each interview space I entered. For example, as researcher, I was often positioned as "interviewer" and "expert" by the interview participants. Not only was I open about the fact that I was working on a dissertation as a requirement of completing my Ph.D., but I was open with the participants about the years of experience I have in adult basic education and the roles I have held within the field. The effect of doing so was two-fold. I was intentionally making myself transparent to the participants during a process which, at times, positioned me as some sort of expert due to my degrees in education and my experience in the field. Though there were not many, there were moments in the interviews when participants looked at me as if to ask for validation of his or her last statement or as if to say, "I do not know the answer." In interviews with Booman, Blacq'Barbii, Juice, and Matt I found myself following up these particular looks with, "There's no right answer. Just tell me what you think." Recognizing my own experience and bowing to the fact that I was the one who determined the boundaries of this project and how claims were made throughout, I worked privately to recursively reflect upon the power I held and continue to hold in regards to this research. I reflected

in a research journal I kept throughout this entire project from proposal to final presentation.

Finally, I remained ethical in re-representation. I was constantly engaged with "the power of the word as voice" (Duncan & Watson, 2010, p. 51) as I crafted re-representations to capture the participants' experiences. Having participants choose their own pseudonyms and working to position myself as a learner in our interview sessions were two of the ways I negotiated myself as not only researcher, but interested party in what "they" (the participants) had to say about adulthood. I told the participants up front that I wanted to know what GED students had to say about adulthood. After my interview with Jack, he remarked, "That was cool. I've never been interviewed before." I expressed my genuine interest in their voices and explained that in my reading I did not hear the voices of students as often as I heard the voices of GED teachers and administrators. Booman remarked that most people "just care about [our] test scores," letting me know that he understood and began to warm to me as an interested inquirer.

Li (2008) pointed out "when studying non-mainstream groups in society such as the marginalized and the stigmatized, researchers must tailor their data collection methods to both the sensitivity of the research topic and the vulnerability of research subjects" (p. 101). In the course of this research, there were many things that were revealed in the interviews that some people, including but not limited to fellow researchers, educators, and committee members, might consider "inappropriate" or even dangerous. I chose not to reveal or use those data portions in this project in order to adhere to my commitment to protect the participants. In an effort to remain transparent in

this text, I state that this was a decision I made as researcher by drawing on my personal ethical code and deemed in the best interests of the participants and this project.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented the theoretical considerations and methodological orientations I brought to this project. Second, I explicated the methods of data collection and data analysis used in this study. Third, I explained how I selected research sites and recruited participants and introduced each participant individually. Finally, I presented criteria for establishing trustworthiness and discussed ethical considerations related to this project.

The next three chapters present findings as they relate to the research questions for this project. Throughout my data collection and analysis process, I shared my preliminary interpretations with friends, colleagues, my advisor, and participants with whom I was still in contact. One challenge that emerged was deciding where to start, what to include, and what to leave out.

My goal is to present re-representations that are layered (Bochner, 2009), acknowledging that there are many stories that could be told and multiple aspects that could be taken-up in re-representing the data collected during the course of this research. With this in mind, I chose to present the findings three different ways: (a) ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005), (b) structured narrative analysis (Labov, 1972), and (c) thematic analysis of narrative (Glesne, 2010). Each of the next three chapters may appear different, but each form of re-representation was chosen based upon my interpretations of the data and how I believed the data could be best re-represented to keep the voice of participants

present. The interpretations shared here are my own and I invite others to share in alternate understandings and interpretations, creating contradictions and allowing for multiple possibilities of re-telling.

Chapter Four focuses on the first research question, *What is the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, transitioning as adult learners?* I have chosen to re-represent the lived experience of the participants in an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 1999, 2005). This chapter is intended to honor the voices and experiences of the participants through their words. I do not offer a formal interpretation in this chapter but instead leave their words open for interpretation by the reader. In Chapters Five and Six, I offer my own interpretations of inaugural moments of adulthood shared by participants as well as themes and patterns of construction and performance of adulthood, respectively. Chapter Five captures the inaugural moments of adulthood described by eight of the twelve participants, analyzed using Labov's (1972) model of structured narrative analysis. I present interpretations of story structure and structural function followed by a discussion of transitions to adulthood. Chapter Six focuses on the second research question, *How do 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood?* and addresses construction and performance of adulthood using poetic text as a means of re-representation.

Chapter Four

Sharing Lived Experience

The previous chapters introduced the purpose and context of this study and unpacked the method used to collect and analyze the data. This chapter shares the findings related to the first research question: *What is the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, transitioning as adult learners?* When considering the recountings of lived experience of the participants interviewed, decisions had to be made regarding which aspect of their lived experiences to include and re-represent relevant to this overall study. Though each individual experience was different, all of the participants shared the experience of leaving high school and transitioning into GED classes. I decided to re-represent this particular aspect of lived experience because it was shared among participants, and I did so through performance text. This chapter begins with a discussion of why I chose to use a performance text and how I created the script. Next, I present the ethnodrama, "Unraveled, Untold Stories," and conclude the chapter with reader responses to the script.

Honoring Voice

> Research Journal Entry, September 19, 2011
>
> *There is a hollow feeling that resides in me as I sit here writing up chapters on methodology and theoretical orientation. What is it for? So that I can share with a group of privileged scholars what I "did" as a rite of passage rather than what the participants "did" for me as a researcher and have "done" for themselves? I remain indebted to the participants, their courage and their stories. I want to*

know more about each of the participants, to talk to them more and hear more of their stories. I want their stories to be heard and I want them to be the ones to tell them. Before each participant interviewed, I explained why I wanted to interview GED students. I told them I read a lot of research about GED classes, programs, and test scores but I didn't read much that actually included the thoughts of the GED students themselves. I explained that I thought hearing what students had to say was important. I do believe that. Even as I sit here navigating between feeling hollow, angry, anxious, over-motivated, determined, and confused, I believe in my deepest of hearts that the voices of the students are the ones that matter.

Because I seek to preserve the voices of the participants and honor their individual and shared stories, I have chosen to re-represent their stories here through ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005). As I thought about the participants' stories and what they meant as a whole, what I was drawn to, and the parts they wanted to share, I began to picture a room of students sitting around talking about their experiences in high school, why they left high school, why they decided to go back to school for their GED, and what that transition was like for them. In my interpretation, all of the stories were anchored by shared feelings of lost ambition, regret, restored hope, and new understandings. I wanted to share the participants' experiences in their words.

In deciding what sort of performance text to create, I reflected upon what several of the participants said about sharing their stories. For example, Marie was nervous about the comments she made regarding race and "being with a Black man." I asked her if she would like me to remove that part of her story. She replied, "No, it's part of who I am and

the choices I made. Maybe if someone else thinking of dropping out of school reads my story they won't make the same mistake."

Jack made reference to sharing his story as if it was advice to other students who would follow in his footsteps. He remarked,

> We all make mistakes in life, but people go out there, make mistakes, and don't quit. Go out there. If you make a mistake, get back up, dust yourself off, and keep going. Don't say, "I made a mistake so I'm gonna quit for now." So just keep pressing toward it and you'll get – that's what I believe in.

Lisa had quite a bit to say about high school, her experience with school, and systemic issues she faced. When asked why she wanted to share her story she replied,

> Because I would rather for everybody to go to high school and fight through that situation and make it, rather than what I'm going through now with a kid and trying to get my GED. I don't want anybody else to go through it. The GED is not the best, but I thank the Lord that they made the GED programs, because it's helping kids like me.

My interest in all the interviews, as well as my respect for the reasons participants expressed for wanting to share their personal stories, moved me toward a performance text in the form of a script. A script allows for multiple interpretations both aurally and visually (Saldaña, 1999). As a performance, a script opens a space to vocalize tensions felt among the students regarding their experiences in school and their transitions to adult education while at the same time fracturing what educators believe they know about high school leavers.

The performance text presented here is an example of ethnodrama, a script written with selections of narrative data collected through interviews, field notes, and journal entries (Saldaña, 2005). As Saldaña (2005) noted, an ethnodrama is a means of "dramatizing the data" (p. 2). This ethnodrama is situated somewhere between an "ensemble play," which includes "multiple characters in multiple vignettes" through a series of monologues and group scenes (Saldaña, 2005, p. 17) and a reader's theatre, which is usually a "joint dramatic reading from a text…with no memorization, no movement and a minimum of props" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 140). The script began to take shape in my mind before I ever put word to page. I went through multiple drafts, and the script is by no means complete. It was my hope in developing this script that sharing participants' stories as a conversation might confirm existing understandings and generate new understandings on the experience of leaving school and returning as a GED student.

The script is in four scenes. This is a result of how I interpreted the narratives to be divided: Scene One, School Days (experience in high school); Scene Two, Leaving (deciding to leave high school); Scene Three, Reflections (thoughts about leaving high school); Scene Four, Change (getting a GED and transitioning to adult education). As I developed the script, I determined which segments of the text to leave in and which portions could be deleted while still remaining true to the storyline. Then, I modified

those passages that required adaptation[7] (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Once the script was in place, students enrolled at Pathways read it as a reader's theatre (RT) and offered their feedback and critique.[8] This was an invaluable opportunity as it allowed me to listen to "the voices of the participants embodied and clearly present" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 140). The title of the script is "Unraveled, Untold Stories," and it was chosen by the GED students who took part in the reader's theatre. The title is a reflection of their feelings and reactions to the script. More discussion on reader responses follows the ethnodrama.

I now open a space for participants' voices as I turn to "Unraveled, Untold Stories." I have chosen not to provide a formal interpretation in this chapter because the script itself is an interpretation of the data (Denzin, 2003a). As readers engage with the text, I beckon them to draw upon their own experiences to make alternative interpretations, "noting places where the experiences escape their language, or, perhaps, push them to places and spaces that are difficult to fully understand or interpret" (Davis, 2012, p. 227).

Unraveled, Untold Stories: An Ethnodrama

The participants in this study were formally introduced in Chapter Three based upon their demographic information and whether or not they identified as an adult. In

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[7] Adaptations made include tense changes (i.e. present to past tense), the inclusion of pseudonyms, transitional phrases, and turning field notes into description of the cast and instructor dialogue. The words in the script in brackets were added by me. They remain the only words not found in interview transcripts.

[8] To ensure the continued confidentiality of the participants, the pseudonyms in the script were changed to "Student 1," "Student 2," etc. to avoid the risk of current students at Pathways recognizing the pseudonyms of fellow students who were participants. Each person present in the reader's theatre signed a pledge of confidentiality (Appendix E) as a further step to protect participants in this study.

"Unraveled, Untold Stories" the participants make up the cast and the introductions provided here go beyond the basic introduction in the previous chapter with the aim of creating an image of each character for the reader. Descriptions combine demographic data, observations taken in field notes, and interview data that included participants' descriptions' of themselves such as hobbies, interests, and personality.

The Cast

Alan is a 19-year-old African American male who left school at the age of 17 after he completed the 11th grade. Alan is talkative and quick to share his experiences. He often quotes his favorite rapper, Lil' Boosie, because many of the lyrics in Boosie's songs resonate with him. His smile is so charming it distracts from his left eye, which droops and appears weaker than his right. He is dressed in a white tee shirt and jeans buckled around the tops of his thighs, exposing the basketball shorts he has on underneath. A diamond earring adorns his left ear.

Blacq'Barbii is an African American female who is 19 years old and has two children. She left school at the age of 15 in the 10th grade when she was pregnant with her first child. Living with her parents and not being financially independent since leaving high school, Blacq' Barbii is unhappy in her life. Her goal is to eventually attend Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes and be hired as a CNA. She is dressed in the clothes she wore out the night before and her electric blue eye shadow matches her shirt, her fingernails, and her toenails to perfection.

Booman is an African American male, age 19, who left school after the 11th grade at the age of 17. He is wearing wire rimmed glasses and shoulder-length dreadlocks with a small white seashell in one or two of the dreads. He has an artistic spirit and is a rap musician in his free time. Sometimes Booman has trouble articulating what he wants to say, and others may think he is keeping things to himself. He does not believe in quitting and is determined to be successful in his life.

Carly is a 19-year-old White female who is wearing a Marilyn Monroe tee shirt and is often seen admiring her hot pink, glittery nails. She left school at age 17 in the second semester of her 10th grade year. Carly is a bit shy yet outgoing. During her turbulent childhood and rough teen years, she found a creative outlet through painting, drawing, music, and decorating.

Jack is an African American male who is 18 years old. He left school after the 10th grade at age 17. He is quiet by nature and likes being alone much of the time. Jack's career goal is to join the state or highway patrol. He is dressed in khaki shorts with a logo tee shirt tucked in.

JeVaunte is an African American male, age 19, who left school before his senior year when he was 18. He is wearing jeans, a long sleeve shirt, and wool hat. JeVaunte is quick to give advice to other students who want to leave high school. He is outgoing, open-minded, and appreciates honesty.

Juice is tall African American female who is 19 years old and mother of one. She left school at age 18 in the 11th grade. Juice is a fast learner and catches on quickly. She fidgets when she gets nervous and crosses her legs back and forth from left to right when she talks. She is wearing a short blue jersey knit sundress and has a tattoo of a star by her left eye.

Kayla is a 22-year-old African American woman with two children. She left school at age 17 after completing the 10th grade. Since that time, she has struggled as a mother to take care of her children and says she "often give[s] up easily." Kayla thinks deeply about questions she is asked and takes time to formulate her responses. She is wearing a miniskirt, flip-flops, and V-neck tee-shirt.

Lisa is an African American female who is 18 years old. With a two-month old baby, she is new to motherhood. After running away from foster care, Lisa left high school in the 10th grade at age 16. She has an inviting smile and, though she speaks in a soft voice, is adamant about what she expresses. Lisa is wearing khaki walking shorts, a black tank top, and on her wrist is a black wrist guard protecting the wrist she injured while holding her baby during a move to a new house.

Marie is a White female, age 25, who left school at age 17 after the 10th grade. She does not smile much and says that as the mother of two, she feels like she is 35 instead of 25. Marie is grounded in her Christian faith and claims what keeps her going are her "church and God." She is dressed in shorts and a tee shirt with her hair pulled back in a short ponytail and dark circles under her eyes. She appears tired.

Matt is a White male who is 19 years old and the father of two children. Matt left school in the 11th grade when he was 18 years old. Having been in and out of juvenile detention most of his teen years, Matt says that almost everything he knows he "learned locked up" and admits that if he was not getting his GED he "would be living in the penitentiary now." His keys hang around the neck of the teal tee shirt he is wearing paired with dark baggy jeans belted around his hips, exposing the black basketball shorts he has on underneath.

Susan is a 25-year-old African American female and mother of three who left school at age 17 after completing the 10th grade. With her hair pulled back and glasses on, Susan appears a bit older than 25. She describes herself as hardworking, outgoing, responsible, helpful, and dependable. Susan does not have a lot to say but is thoughtful and to-the-point in her remarks.

Unraveled, Untold Stories

Prologue

(The students are seated at classroom tables arranged in a u-shape facing the audience. It is break time in the GED classroom. Lisa is listening to indistinct chatter about what it was like in high school for some of the students. She leans forward to address the group.)

Lisa: I would like to say that high school is school. Everybody have to go. I believe that's when change comes into kids' life, when they go to high school and into an environment where there is different kids from all over the place. Some don't care. Some do care. But, the majority don't care.

You put a new kid that just is now experiencing life into that environment, I do believe, it messes their lives up. I want to say high school messes kids' lives up, unless they in a good environment or basically just focused on one thing, and that is school and life, and won't let nothing distract them. I feel if everybody worked together, if all the adults worked together, and sat down and had the kids work together in a better way and let them explain their sides, I think school would be a whole lot better, especially high school.

Scene One: School Days
(experience in high school)

(The other students look at Lisa, some nod in agreement, and a few lean back in their chairs and breathe deeply.)

Juice: You know, sometimes some teachers care, and some teachers don't care. Sometimes some teachers are smart, and sometimes some of them aren't.

JeVaunte: In high school they don't care, they just want to get paid. It's probably just about the money. As long as they there in the classroom they can't lose because as long as they are present at school they don't really have to teach. They can be there and not teach, and they still get paid.

My experience in high school was not very good. In my ninth grade year I was always into trouble. Everybody picked on me because I was the new kid and I was a freshman, so they saw "fresh meat," somebody they thought they could pick on. I was always in trouble because I wasn't no pushover.

Alan: Shoot, when I was in ninth grade, I was always sleeping in class and not caring. If I didn't know the answer, I was probably too proud to ask. You know what I'm saying? I really didn't ask questions. I let my pride get the best of me just because I didn't know the answers and stuff. I was thinking, "I don't need high school."

Carly: Well, my freshman year was probably the best year I had because I knew everybody from middle school. All my friends were there. It went by really fast, plus I was doing really good with my grades because all the teachers were really nice and they were really good at teaching.

Kayla: See, when I first got to high school my freshman year, 2003, I was good. I was doing good at first, and then I got mixed up with an older boy. He was a senior. He had my head gone. I was only 14, and I just kind of really gave up in school at that time.

Matt: My freshman year was my favorite year of high school, which you probably don't hear a lot of people say. I was down in Georgia though, and it went by kind of fast. But, that was my favorite year because that was when I actually paid attention and actually got credits.

Blacq'Barbii: When I was in high school, like, I wouldn't say I made good grades at all because I was always in trouble. I was just going to class just to have good attendance. I wasn't really focusing. I did my work, but I wouldn't put my all into it because I could just care less. I just didn't really care.

Booman: I paid attention in class. Like, I was smart and all that**.** I loved to learn. I always loved to learn.

Marie: I feel like I could have been an A/B Honor Roll student if I wanted to.

Booman: But, I mean, I was a kid, so I like messed with other people and played around in class. When I was in school, I used to go to school just to sell weed, but I know that wasn't me.

JeVaunte: There was too many things that distracted me. My 10th grade year I had to catch up from where I was slacking my ninth grade year, and I couldn't do

that. I just couldn't do it. I mean, I could have done it, but my head was not in the right place when I was at school.

Marie: They tried to say I was ADHD in kindergarten, first, second grade, somewhere around there, and they actually prescribed me the Ritalin. I struggled with school. I was tormented and miserable, and it wasn't fun for me. I was just always so miserable at school.

JeVaunte: Like in the classrooms you got people yelling from one side of the room to another side of the room just to tell this person one thing that really, really, don't make no sense. We'd get in the middle of a test, and they'd want to talk, and it just throwed me off because I get throwed off real quick. When they would start talking it would really distract me, and it'd be hard for me to learn.

Carly: After my freshman year, it started getting rough because my mom moved up here and I moved in with her. Two months later she wanted to move back to Texas with another boyfriend. We had to move with her, and we went to a totally different school. But, it was hard academically. Their education level is, like, higher. And I didn't know anybody. I only stayed there until the second semester.

Matt: I moved back up here the second semester of my freshman year and was trying to get into Broad High School and couldn't because of a custody thing when I was younger. My mom and dad was fighting over custody or something, and my dad couldn't get me into Broad High School because it had something to do with that custody paper. So, I didn't even go to school the whole second semester of my freshman year. My sophomore year my mother signed me into Key High School, and I went a little bit the first semester. My second semester I pretty much skipped the whole time. I'd wake up and I'd go with a girl to her house and just chill with her. I'd just skip school for the hell of it. I didn't like high school. I was just being a little rage.

Lisa: My experience in high school was not so good, but I have to start back in middle school. I had a rough childhood, and I couldn't go to school because at an early age I got pregnant and had to have an abortion. I don't remember how old I was. I know I was in the 7th grade. From that time on, I was home-schooled up until my time to go to high school. I really didn't know nothing because I really wasn't getting home-schooled. I was just at home.

So, when I finally got to go to high school, I didn't like it. I didn't want to go because I didn't know too much about it. I didn't feel smart. I was like, "I don't have nobody to help me. I don't have nobody here to push me and to teach me, how is this going to make my life better?"

Juice: I didn't really care about high school. I went to Vine High School my freshman year. Sometimes I went to school, but I didn't really like school. You know, sometimes you do your work, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you talk. If I went, I went to talk and socialize and stuff like that. I did my work but not really. Somebody could be talking, and I'd be paying attention to them instead of paying attention to the teacher.

Lisa: I was going to all the wrong kind of schools. Vine High School is an example. It is nothing but a drug zone, and kids in there, they just want to come to school to basically show out and make a scene. They always want to fight. They always – you know, smoking in the bathroom and making alarms go off, so the whole school got to leave out the building. It's every day, not just one day a week, not just once a month. This is about every day. Every time I turned around, I seen an officer either checking somebody down or fighting with a kid. You're not supposed to go to school to do that. You're supposed to go to school to learn. I couldn't learn in my class, because I got kids in my class that just wanted to act foolish for no reason.

Scene Two: Leaving
(deciding to leave high school)

(Jack has been sitting back in his chair, listening to what everyone else has had to say. He sits up and addresses Lisa.)

Jack: All the nonsense that was going on in school is what led me to leave school. I had my part to do too, but a lot of teachers it seemed like they didn't want to do what they were supposed to do. It was getting real difficult, and because of that my grades were slipping. I wouldn't be on time to graduate. That's why I dropped out and figured if I'd get my GED. I mean it carries pretty much the same weight that a high school diploma does. I just left when school was out last year, 2010, and I just never went back.

JeVaunte: I dropped out my junior year. I went for one semester then when I turned 18 I signed my papers and left. I let my peers bother me and I gave up.

Susan: I left high school my junior year too. If I would've stayed it wouldn't have made a difference. My credits were so low.

Alan: They basically booted me. I really didn't have a decision. They just told me I couldn't go there no more, probably because I didn't have enough credits. I really didn't care. They told my granny, and one day she's like, "You don't go to school there no more." So I was like, "All right." I was just thinking about how I was going to get some money because you can't live without money. Can't nobody survive without no job. I mean it wasn't a big deal to me, but at the time, if I had been thinking, I would have probably cared.

Blacq'Barbii: I dropped out of school in the 10th grade because I had got pregnant and, like, walking to different classes with a big old belly was just not cutting it for me at all. I'd run out of breath or I'd always be late to class or I'd just be, like, "I'm going to have to go get me a snack" and crazy stuff like that. I was 15 at the time.

(The instructor returns to the room and pulls up a chair. The students look at her but she encourages them to keep talking.)

Instructor: Don't stop because I am here. I mean as long as you don't mind, I would love to hear your stories. Go ahead, keep talking.

(The students look around at one another and hesitate. Booman chimes in.)

Booman: I was 17, and I had made a decision to go to Job Corps.[9] I filled the paper out, like a really thick application, and they lost my paper so I couldn't go. They wanted me to fill it out again. I was, like, "No." I felt like it was a sign from God that I didn't need to go. I came to find out Job Corps wasn't a place I wanted to go. Like, people are selling drugs in there, and there are fights all the time and all that. So, I'm like, "Man, I'll just get my GED because I'm just tired." I was just tired of school and tired of the people because there was always drama. Like, a kid got killed at my school and all that. Plus, I didn't have enough credits. I just got frustrated and left.

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[9] Job Corps is a free education and training program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. It is intended to help young people learn a career, earn a high school diploma or GED, and find and keep a job. People who are at least 16 years of age and qualify as low income are eligible for Job Corps.

Carly: I guess I'm a little bit different. They took me to a psych…psych…one of those hospitals?

Instructor: Psychiatric hospital?

Carly: Yeah. See, my mom, she's not the best kind of mother there is. She was a really bad alcoholic and always with her boyfriends and stuff like that. So if one of her boyfriends would touch me or my little sisters, I'd always try to fight them. They tried to get me arrested, but the police officer said that it was self-defense. Eventually, they sent me [to the hospital]. At the second hospital I went to, my mom left me there. You're not supposed to be released until your mom comes in, and I wasn't 18 yet so I couldn't leave. Because I was in those hospitals, I had to miss school. That's the reason why I left high school.

Juice: My 11th grade year I had a baby, and that's sort-of why I stopped going really. Well, that and transportation. I went my 12th grade year when we started back. I didn't leave school just because I was pregnant. I wanted to stay. I was in 11th grade going to the 12th so of course this was my last year to do it.

I was living on the east side, and I was going to Rural High School. The bus was coming at like six something in the morning. I didn't have transportation at the time to get my son to daycare. Our daycare don't open up at five something in the morning for me to get to the bus at 6:00. I tried to get a transfer to Vine High School where I went my freshman year. They transferred me, but Vine wouldn't accept me in. They said I was 18 already and I should have stayed at Rural High School. Vine was saying, "You're not going to graduate." They said I wouldn't get all my credits. But I only needed seven credits. I felt like it was wrong for them not to let me in. I mean they could have given me the benefit of the doubt and let me start at Vine so I could graduate. That would have helped me and helped them, but I didn't have no support or nothing like that. So I was just like, "Well, forget it."

Kayla: I was 17 when I dropped out of school. I ended up getting kicked out of school my freshman year. I got to go back close to the end of that year, but my mom made me go to [a different school]. From where I got kicked out and stuff like that and been being with that boy [I told you about], I wouldn't do my work. My grades were falling. When I got to my junior year I think I only had like 11 or 12 credits. I was in 11th grade, and my guidance counselor said I wouldn't be able to graduate in 2007. I

would have to stay for 2008. I just thought it would be better to get my GED so I just left.

Marie: I left school in the 11th grade. I was 17. I went to Florida to live with my uncle and help take care of him. [When I went to school], I was kinda scared because only me and the counselor was White and everyone else was Black. I was scared that if I started to like a guy, the other girls wouldn't like that, or just something was gonna happen because I was literally the only White person - me and the guy that was a counselor. I called my mom, and she said, "Well, just quit then." So I was like, "Forget school." I look back on it now, and it's so funny because I'm with a Black man now and I have two biracial kids.

Matt: So, really the whole second semester of my sophomore year I didn't go to school, and when it became my junior year I realized I done screwed up because I only had three credits. I had to go to summer school and everything, and I just pretty much gave up. Really it was just a social time for me, but I didn't socialize with anybody. I just kinda paid attention, but I didn't do any work. I would sit in my desk and either sleep or just listen to the teacher. I wouldn't talk, and while she would talk, I would just go to sleep or sometimes I couldn't go to sleep so I'd just be listening, and I would catch a lot of it, but I just pretty much gave up. When senior year came around I kept trying to drop out, but they wouldn't let me drop out because I wasn't 18 yet. Then when I turned 18 I just dropped out. I left high school the day after my [18th] birthday. I just dropped out.

Lisa: When I was in the ninth grade I left school pretty much every [morning] after I got there. When it was time for me to straighten up and I realized, "This is reality. I gotta get my life together," it was too late. My ninth grade year had went by, and I was already in the 10th when I finally went to try to get things situated. Then I got put in foster care, and I pretty much gave up on everything.

I left high school out of the 10th grade, which would be 2008 for me. After I was placed into foster care, one night I decided, "When I go to school tomorrow morning. I'm just going to leave school and not come back." I left in 10th grade and never went back. I ran away.

I was out on the streets. I was going from house to house, living with different family members and not staying too long because I knew they would call somebody to come pick me up. I was just basically a little bit of everywhere. I was basically just scared at the simple fact I knew I was going to have to go to a family that wasn't mine. So, I kept running away.

I'd still been running at the time I found out I was pregnant. I, like, totally lost it. It felt like I was losing my life. I'm like, "I can't bring a child into this world," and "My life is not right," and "I'm still a child myself," you know? I couldn't be happy. I was not happy at all.

(The room falls silent, and the instructor looks around at the students. Most of them have their heads angled down as if they are looking at something on the table in front of them.)

Scene Three: Reflections
(thoughts on leaving high school)

(The class sits in silence for a bit longer. Everyone looks up when Kayla begins to speak.)

Kayla: I think about it every day. [It was] very dumb, I think, to leave high school. I mean, I didn't think back then. No. I was just having fun and being young and wasn't worried about it.

Marie: Biggest mistake I made.

(Silence.)

Instructor: Can you say more, Marie?

Marie: 'Cause I'm here now having to do this [GED] at 25 when I could have finished at 18. If I would have finished school and went to college, I would say that I probably wouldn't have been with a Black man. I probably wouldn't have kids. I'd probably have a good education, a house and a car, everything I wanted to begin with. If I could erase stuff, I would. But, I don't want to erase my kids.

Kayla: It hurts me, and it eats me up when I look at my kids. I don't regret having them, but I just wish I could turn some stuff back around. I believe if I'd got my diploma or had my GED already it wouldn't be as much of a struggle because it would probably be easier to get a job. I'm having a hard time getting jobs and stuff like that. They all ask me for my diploma or GED, and I can't show nothing. Not having an education has really hurt me a lot in getting good jobs.

Marie: If I could go back in time, I would definitely change some things.

Carly: If I could go back in time, I'd probably have stayed in school because you can get higher levels and better jobs. Plus, you can go back to class

reunions and stuff like that. But on the other hand, I'm kind of proud of myself in a way because times got rough and I have had to pay my own bills.

Blacq'Barbii: If I knew what I know today, I'd change it all the way. I mean staying in high school and getting your diploma, it'll take you very, very far. Without it you can't really go anywhere, and I've noticed that because I'm 19 and I'm still here with nothing. I do not have a job. Really, the only place that will probably hire me is a fast food restaurant or [a grocery store] or places like that. I don't want to work there for the rest of my life because I have two children and that would not cover me and the two of them at all.

Alan: If I could start back from ninth grade and start all over again, I probably would have been more focused just because of what I know now. But, if I would have just asked questions and applied myself and did all that other stuff, I probably would have passed or graduated.

Jack: Dropping out is the biggest decision that I made because I changed a lot. I don't think in high school when I dropped out I was as mature as I am now. I can't say I was fully mature back then.

Booman: I wish I would've played it smarter. It's something I look back on, like, "I made a mistake. That was a bad mistake." But, I don't really regret it because I'm in a good position where I am in life right now so I ain't really mad.

JeVaunte: Leaving school is not no good choice. If you are in school, you should stick it out. Don't let your peers bother you.

(He pauses.)

That was my mistake.

Matt: *(Matt fidgets with his cell phone and continues looking down at it while he speaks.)*

Well, it takes a lot of responsibility to move from high school to GED class. You shouldn't have to do it a second time.

(He looks up and addresses the group.)
Just get it done the first time because it slows your life down.

Scene Four: Change
(getting a GED and transitioning to adult education)

Instructor: So, if you guys don't mind, I have a question.

(She looks around the room to take in the students' expressions. Only Alan looks at her.)

Alan: Nah, that's cool. Go ahead.

Instructor: Well, for those of you who don't mind sharing, I am interested in knowing what made you decide to come and get your GED.

(There is a brief period of silence. The instructor continues looking around the room.)

Blacq'Barbii: I was with my boyfriend, and we weren't doing nothing besides laying up all day and that's when I got pregnant again. I'm like, "Well, If I'm doing this, and I'm sitting under him 24/7, I'm not going to do nothing but keep having kids." I'm like, "I've got to do something."

Instructor: So, you decided you would come here?

Blacq'Barbii: Well, I'd go look for a job, and wouldn't nobody hire me except for, like, McDonalds and stuff. I realized how hard it can be without a GED or a high school diploma, and I don't want to work at fast food restaurants for the rest of my life. So I went to a GED program because you can make more money and go to college and live a life that you want to with good income.

Matt: When I dropped out of high school, I was like, "Whoa," because I didn't see nobody or talk to nobody anymore. I was just really at home all the time, bored, and nothing to do, so that kind of motivated me. Then finally, when I got to the child support court of my little girl, I was like, "I'm gonna enroll in GED and get that done so I can have a better job."

Carly: I saw that sign out by stores that said "Free GED Classes," and I called the number. The woman [I talked to] actually referred me to here, and I just called here, and I got in that day and started testing.

Marie: I've lived out here for three years, and I've seen these "Free GED Class" signs forever and ever. At the beginning of 2011 it was my New Year's

resolution to get my GED. Last year is when I became a Christian, and I was like, "It's just time to focus on God, focus on my kids, and focus on my education to get out of here." So it just kind of – just hit me one day.

I have to do it for my kids because a GED leads to more, which leads to out of public housing. I've lived in three public housing neighborhoods, and each time I move it's like it's a step to the same thing when I should be going up and [instead] I'm not going nowhere. I don't want to be considered low-income. I don't want to have to raise my kids here. A GED seems like a way out.

Juice: It's the same for me. A GED is important to me because I can better my life, and I'm helping my son's life get better, too.

Kayla: That's right. A year after I dropped out I got pregnant, and I was working at McDonald's and having to work hard the whole nine months. After I had him I went back. I was just tiresome. I could see that I don't want to be working in a dead end job for the rest of my life. I don't want my kids to have to work like that either.

Lisa: I didn't go back to school until I was on the run, and I actually got put into Juvenile and placed into another foster home. At the time I was pregnant with my child. You know, basically my eyes opened. I thought, "They will take my child or my child will go through what I am going through right now if I don't straighten up and make it better for her." So, I got enrolled in GED classes.

Jack: I knew that once I left high school I just couldn't keep it like that. I knew I had to go get my GED. I knew I couldn't get a job that I would be happy with without my GED. But, when I went into the first GED program, it didn't meet my expectations. I'm thinking it was gonna be one-on-one attention from teachers but when I went in there it wasn't. You had this huge class. The teacher teaches the class as a whole, and if you have 30 students in the class, yeah, you get an hour- the whole class gets an hour for personal work, but you've got 30 students! The teacher can't come around to everybody for a whole hour.

(The other students nod and utter things like "Yep" and "Same here." Then Alan speaks up in agreement.)

Alan: That was the problem for me. I went to one [GED program], and I didn't like it at all because I felt like sometimes I wasn't doing some of the work I should have been doing. The teacher was all over the place, and he didn't

really want to help us at all. I felt like I couldn't progress. I tried it for, like, three weeks straight, and then I was just like, "Forget it. I ain't doing it no more."

Carly: Whenever I went to enroll in GED before, the woman just handed me the practice test, and she told me I failed it. She told me to keep on taking it until I passed. But I didn't know how to do anything… *(Laughs)*

Juice: Yep, that's right. I tried to get my high school diploma at that mall school. I felt like somebody could at least teach me stuff. They just gave me a book and said, "Here. Complete all this and turn it in." I felt like I needed at least someone to go over it and just help me try to understand it so I could do it by myself. They really wasn't doing that, so I really wasn't comfortable.

Jack: This program is way different from the other one. I'm actually getting stuff that took me weeks to get out there. The people here really help me understand the work better than they did at the other place.

Alan: Somebody had told me about this program and was like, "You need to come to this GED program because they help you get a job and stuff." I was like, "I'm going to check it out." Then when I came here, I just started working hard to try to get my GED because it's a good program. I like it 'cause the teacher is more interactive with us than most teachers are and she helps with the problems we need.

Matt: When I came in here, I mean, I was just welcomed here. It was just like, you know, "I should've did it my first time, but they're gonna give me a second chance, so just do any and everything you can do in order to get it."

Marie: Yeah, it's not the regular classroom. There's not desks in a row with kids and a teacher having to tell you how to do it and – it's a lot different 'cause it's mainly adults here. Like, they don't tape your name up on the board or nothing like that. The teachers here have really encouraged me to keep coming. Even when I did quit, they said that it took a few other people two years to get their GED. They just keep encouraging me.

Alan: Yeah, it's different than my experience in high school.

Kayla: It was way different [than high school], because, you know, it's like in class at high school you know everybody's working together on the same thing. But here you know you work at your own pace, and it's more like a

one-on-one thing. In high school it's not like that. It's more like everybody's together, working together. You don't have as much one-on-one help.

Matt: Well, in here it's like you've gotta do it. In high school, the teachers would be like, "Sit down. Shut up. Do your work." Here you can talk if you want to, but it's your own mistake. You don't do your work, that's your own fault. In high school they make you do it.

Jack: In GED programs you're pretty much on your own schedule. You come when you want to. GED is no rush. High school is, "You got to have this turned in by this date," and it's five days a week. If you don't go, you get in trouble for truancy. Here it's pretty much, just come. Let them know if you're not gonna come, but it's come as you are. You're on your own schedule.

JeVaunte: I would say a GED adult learning program it is much better than being in a high school classroom full of obnoxious teenagers. They help you more. In school they get mad at you if you still don't understand, but here you can ask somebody a question. If you don't understand it, they will tell you, and if you still don't understand, they can help you some more instead of just getting mad at you and giving you thousands and thousands of homework pages that you do not understand. That's how it was when I was in school.

Matt: It was kinda different, but it was pretty much what I expected here. It helps me more because I don't want somebody jumping down my throat all the time. Here I can go take a break, smoke a cigarette, whatever, and then go back to work. If I sit there and stare at a paper like in high school for eight hours all day, I'd just trip.

Lisa: I was expecting things to be a lot harder for me, but when I got here, the instructor sat me down, and no matter how many students was in a room, she came to us one-by-one and helped us a lot. That was every day.

JeVaunte: To me, it seems like GED teachers love what they do, and they actually care and they want you to succeed. When I actually sat in a classroom the first time, I was like, "This is way better than high school. I should have done this a long time ago."

The End.

Reader Response

There were seventeen students present at Pathways the day I visited for the reader's theatre (RT). At first, it was difficult at first to get students to volunteer to be readers. There was some discussion about not being a "good reader" and not being fond of reading aloud. Once the RT finally began, the participants were engaged and so were the students following along with a copy of the script. Following the reading, I asked the participants to share their reactions, thoughts, feelings, and comments.

Those who read as well as those who were listeners reacted to the script with similar stories or responded to the stories in the script as "sound[ing] like" them. One student remarked, "Everyone in here can feel what others [in the script] feel." The participants in the RT also reiterated how different GED class was from high school for them, and some said getting a GED was their "last chance." Another student remarked that a she thought everyone in the room would change something if they could, "That's why we're here – same as the people in [the script]." When I asked the RT participants who they thought should hear or read the script, I anticipated their responses would include GED instructors and maybe even high school teachers. This anticipation was no doubt a product of my experience as a GED instructor and my desire to have other adult educators hear the stories in the script. Instead, the RT participants' immediate response was "high school students – so they won't give up." As the discussion continued they suggested high school and GED teachers should read it as well. Elizabeth, the director at Pathways, and Caitlyn, the GED instructor at Pathways, agreed, stating that sometimes as

adult educators they became "immune" to the "baggage" students brought with them when they returned to school. In her email response, Caitlyn wrote:

> I really appreciated the affirmation of the instructor role in both the script and discussion. Sometimes I feel so tired and discouraged. I really do need to remind myself of the "baggage" they may carry and how critical my support is to their esteem and success. (Personal communication, January 11, 2012)

Before wrapping up the discussion, the group agreed that middle school and elementary school students should interact with the script. As one student put it, [middle school students] "need to be *attacked* with this because kids are having kids and it is starting younger and younger."

As an adult educator who has worked primarily with adult basic education, I was drawn to the responses offered in the reader's theatre. Not only did the responses sound familiar to the students who participated but they reiterated to the practitioner side of me how much my understanding of each student's life experience matters when creating a stable, nurturing, and inclusive learning environment. As a researcher, I received validation that there are many more stories and voices in adult basic education that are ready to be heard and that the ones who hold these stories know exactly who they want to hear them.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed why I chose to use a performance text along with an outline of how I went about creating a performance script. Next, I presented the ethnodrama, "Unraveled, Untold Stories," and let the words of the participants speak for

themselves. This chapter came to a close with an overview of reader responses to the script. Chapter Five turns to analysis and interpretation of inaugural moments of adulthood.

Chapter Five

Becoming Adults

In the previous chapter, the lived experience of the participants was re-represented through an ethnodrama. In this chapter, I turn to analysis and interpretation of the inaugural moments of adulthood described by the eight participants who identified as adults. The chapter begins with an overview of what I named "inaugural moments," followed by a brief explanation of how I used Labov's (1972) structured narrative analysis. Next, I present my interpretation of the data in terms of story structure and structural function. The chapter ends with a discussion of transitions to adulthood. I am cautious in presenting these interpretations; I do not want to imply that these stories are complete—stories are always partial (Noblit et al., 2004)—or that there is but one interpretation. My interpretations are presented with the acknowledgement that my position is not value-free as it guides my understandings and subsequent interpretations (Kleinman & Copp, 1993).

Inaugural Moments

Researchers who work with narrative have written about the consequential nature of particular events in life stories. For example, Denzin (1989) discussed *epiphanies* as "moments of revelation in life" (p. 47). He identified epiphanies as significant moments or events that turn a participant's life around and noted that, typically, biographies are "structured by the significant, turning point moments" (p. 22). Through their work with narrative inquiry, Webster and Mertova (2007) posited that specific events determine how life experiences are recalled and that life experiences are most often recalled in the

form of *critical events*. *Critical events* are events told in a story that "reveal a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller" (p. 73). My effort to capture inaugural moments of adulthood in the stories of the participants was informed by (a) discussions in narrative research regarding consequential life events, and (b) the fact that in youth research turning points or life events have been discussed primarily in terms of social categories such as leaving home, starting a family, or the move from school to work rather than in terms of personal experience and change (Thomson et al., 2002).

Adult educators often encounter learners during a time of transition in their lives such as returning to school to earn a GED, returning for worker re-training or vocational education, or returning to learn new skills of interest (Rossiter, 1999). There seems to be a connection between adult learning and change that fuels adult educators' understanding of the development process (Rossiter, 1999). Mezirow's (1981, 1991, 1995) study and theory of perspective transformation suggested that learner transformation begins with a disorienting dilemma that subsequently triggers a new experience, whether a new learning experience or a redefinition of the meaning of life, identity, or action. Much like Thomson et al. (2002), Henderson et al. (2007), and Giddens (1991), Mezirow conceived of a "disorientating dilemma" as a transition point toward a new way of thinking and being that is encountered when new experiences challenge old ways of thinking. In Mezirow's (1995) view, one way a disorienting dilemma is triggered is by a life crisis or major life transition. Through these disorienting dilemmas there is potential for transformation via critical reflection that leads to a new understanding of the experience.

When considering inaugural moments of adulthood, there is a connection between Mezirow's (1981, 1991, 1995) concept of disorienting dilemmas as part of perspective transformation and the research of Henderson et al. (2007) and Thomson et al. (2002) on *critical moments,* which are built upon Giddens' (1991) concept of *fateful moments.* For Giddens (1991), *fateful moments* were highly consequential and potentially empowering experiences in which individuals have to take responsibility for new demands and a potentially new direction. These "fateful moments are transition points which have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual's future conduct but for self-identity" (p. 143).

Adopting Giddens' concept of *fateful moments* as a theoretical construct in their five-year longitudinal study, *Inventing Adulthoods,* Henderson et al. (2007) sought to document transitions to adulthood of approximately 120 people aged 16 to 19 in the United Kingdom by identifying *critical moments* in their biographies and exploring how these moments impacted transitions to adulthood. The term *critical moment,* is used to "describe events in young people's lives that they or the researchers considered to be highly consequential" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 20). *Critical moments* differ from Giddens' *fateful moments* in that the former are based upon narratives and create complication or a turn in the narrative (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and are most often recognized not in the moment but in hindsight (Thomson et al., 2002).

In this research, I use the term "inaugural moments" to refer to those events participants shared as their entry into adulthood, both consequential in nature and having implications for self-identity. I consider "inaugural moments" to be transition points that

create new understandings of adulthood. As Rossiter (1999) pointed out, "Change—whether brought about through an intentional transition, 'normative' development, or an unexpected event in life—presents new circumstances and evidence that cannot be ignored in one's personal meaning system" (p. 83). Capturing inaugural moments has the potential to offer a new way of understanding how economic and social environments shape personal narratives and development of adult identity. For the participants I interviewed, inaugural moments were tied to parenthood and caring for others as the events that launched their movement toward adulthood. These events are not the whole story, but one part of the participants' claim to adulthood that reflects their resilience, courage, and resourcefulness.

Analysis of inaugural moments, which are only part of the participants' narratives of self as they relate to adulthood, begins to open a space for understanding how young people transition into what they construct as adulthood. In opening that space, it must be noted there is no clearly defined passage to adulthood as a place at which one arrives (Wyn & White, 1997). Instead, transitions to adulthood are culturally and socially scripted and, considering Giddens' (1991) reflexive project of self as discussed in Chapter Three, these inaugural moments can be interpreted as ways in which participants begin to reflexively understand their self-identity as adults.

Structured Narrative Analysis

During the data analysis phase of this research, inaugural moments were identified in two ways: (a) through responses to particular questions on the interview protocol (i.e. When do you think you became an adult?), and (b) by identifying terms and

phrases that signaled, for example, entry into adulthood (i.e. "I became an adult when…"). Once these inaugural moments were identified, I used Labov's (1972) model of structured narrative analysis to code, analyze, and interpret the participants' stories of inaugural moments.

Labov (1972) suggested that stories are about specific past events and framed in response to the question, *and then what happened?* His model of structured narrative analysis uses a chronology of events to construct a narrative. The model includes six categories (Table 2), each of which serves to address a different question about narrative structure, fulfilling a different function in a story (Labov, 1972). I closely scrutinized the narratives in order to identify the functional components of these stories. Specifically, I compared the organization of the narratives with the components of a fully formed narrative: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Labov, 1972), noted similarities between them, and identified moments of complicating action or tension in story. As an example of this type of analysis and representative of the other narratives collected (Appendix I), Juice's narrative of her inaugural moment of adulthood coded using Labov's model is presented (Table 3).

According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Labov's model accomplishes two things: (a) it gives a way to see how narratives are structured, and (b) it provides a "perspective from which to reflect on the functions of the story" (p. 61). Identifying the structural units of narrative pushed me to think about the data in different ways (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Comparing how stories were constructed demonstrates how close

attention to story structure can yield different findings than a thematic analysis would (Riessman, 2008). For example, a thematic analysis leads to an interpretation and

Table 3.

Example of Data Coded Using Structured Narrative Analysis (Juice's Narrative)

Component	Line #	Narrative Text
Abstract *What is the story about?*	168	When do you think you started moving into adulthood?
Orientation *Who, What, When?*	171 175	When I had my baby at 17
Complicating Action *What happened next?*	175 176 177 178	I got pregnant at 16…My momma was on drugs for like seven years. Then my daddy was in and out of jail, so I really didn't have nobody to just talk to. So, I basically had to grown myself up, when I had him.
Evaluation *So what?*	180 181 182	That made me want to mature quicker. I mean, I felt like I was mature for my age, but that just did it.
Resolution *How does it end?*	182 183	So when I turned 18, I got a job. It took me a little minute, but I got my own place.
Coda *What does it mean?*	183	Everything going good, so far.

discussion based upon themes that are present across participants' narratives but does not necessarily lend itself to understanding how and where those themes were present in the participants narrative. Was that theme a part of the complicating action of the

participant's narrative or was it part of the resolution? As Riessman (2008) points out, where the theme occurs in the story and how it affects story structure is based upon the "agency of the teller and is central to composing narratives" (p. 15). Some narrative researchers might contend that the six structural elements in Labov's model can be interpreted as a way to thematize the data with each category being a theme. However, I have not approached Labov's method this way. I have taken up structured narrative analysis as a way to code, analyze, and interpret the narratives of inaugural moments of adulthood. I have identified themes that were present across these narratives but, unlike thematic analysis of narrative, I attempted to interpret these themes in the context of story structure and structural function. Using Labov's model this way allowed me to identify fairly well-developed narratives of inaugural moments with a beginning, middle, and end. As further demonstrated in Appendix I, Labov's method also helped to identify narrative components, sequences, and structural parts common across accounts of inaugural moments of adulthood.

Interpretation of Structure

According to structured narrative analysis, each part of the story has a function that relates directly to the interpretation of the story. It is important to provide an interpretation of the structural elements of the stories participants shared. For the purposes of this dissertation, interpretations of Labov's (1972) six structural elements are not discussed. Instead, I have chosen to highlight and discuss inaugural moments in three parts: (a) overall plot structure, (b) complicating action, and (c) evaluation. Eight participants described their inaugural moment of adulthood. Rather than including all

eight narratives in the main body of the text, I chose to include a few examples of those eight narratives that are representative of all the narratives collected (Appendix I).

Plot structure. Although the inaugural moments that were shared were unique to each participant, they were reported in a conventional story structure with a beginning, middle, and end (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The participants usually began their stories with an abstract, sometimes repeating the question asked of them, then providing an orientation to the situation, followed by a complicating action. Each participant's situation was eventually resolved and resulted in articulated increased maturity or acknowledgement of maturity. The story told by Juice (Table 3) is representative of the plot structures present in other narratives (Appendix I). Juice's account takes the classic form of a story as it moves chronologically through time, contextualizes the story by orienting the listener to the time, and reports on past events. In response to the question, *When do you think you started moving into adulthood?,* her story continues:

> When I had my baby at 17. I got pregnant at 16. My momma was on drugs for, like, seven years. Then my daddy was in and out of jail, so I really didn't have nobody to just talk to. So, I basically had to grown myself up, when I had him. That made me want to mature quicker. I mean, I felt like I was mature for my age, but that just did it. So when I turned 18, I got a job. It took me a little minute, but I got my own place. Everything going good, so far.

Booman described an entirely different event that led him to adulthood, but he explained his inaugural moment in a similar way:

> I think I became an adult when I was 17. My mom was having trouble with a lot of things. She didn't have no job because of the economy, and we didn't have food really, so I had to walk to the food line. And we had two other brothers, so they had to eat too. So I used to walk and bring the food back for my mom because she couldn't do it because of her leg. Because my daddy wasn't helping, so I had to do it myself. I started going to church and, like, I feel that God gave me understanding to be a real man and, like, surely if you want to be a man this is how it is. I think that's when I became a man is when I understood what I was supposed to do. So I used to walk to the food line, and I still thank God for it because without that I probably wouldn't be eating [then]. Things get hard, so you just got to keep going, and that's what I did.

Other participants shared their stories in the same structure present in Juice's and Booman's stories. In my interpretation, commonalities in plot structure indicate that personal transitions into adulthood can point to an event that occurred at a particular moment in time and signaled entry into adulthood for participants.

Complicating action. The complicating action is most often an account of the events that are central to the story (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and usually recounted in the past tense. In the stories of inaugural moments, the complicating actions narrate transition points that created new understandings for participants in this study and hastened their transitions to adulthood but are different for several of the participants.

Absent parents and having to take responsibility either for themselves or for others because of their parents' absence was the complicating action referenced by Alan,

JeVaunte, and Juice. Each of them identified as low-income. Lareau's (2003) work on race, family, and social class indicates the way in which parenting and social class are inextricably linked. Middle-class youth over the age of 18 have been found to be "more dependent and child-like than working class" and poor "youth" (Lareau & Cox, 2011, p. 139). Moreover, there is a pattern of intervention and assistance by middle-class parents that is not present in working-class and poor parents often attributed to the resources available (Lareau & Cox, 2011). Alan described when he became an adult at age 14:

> My momma was always out doing whatever she did, and I was always with my brothers and my sisters. I had to wake up like 6:00 just to pick up around the house, wake them up for school, get my brother and sister and help her with all the little stuff she needed help with, take a shower, and just do all kind of stuff. Then I still had to get myself ready. So taking care of them, watching my brothers and sisters, I think that's what made me an adult.

Juice also discussed absent parents as part of her complicating action, "My momma was on drugs for like seven years. Then my daddy was in and out of jail, so I really didn't have nobody to just talk to. So, I basically had to grown myself up…" For Alan and Juice, the complicating action within the structure of their stories signals movement into adulthood as a result of being faced with the challenge of independence, but not by choice.

> JeVaunte also mentioned the absence of a parent in his complicating action:
> I had to live on my own for six months, and it was very hard. When I was getting my stuff taken care of such as my birth certificate, Social Security card or ID, I

> always had my Mamma to do it and then, when I went up there [new city] and had to do it on my own, didn't nobody help me. I had to get on the phone myself, schedule the appointment, saying do it yourself. Mamma wasn't there to help me. So, I had to learn on my own…

In JeVaunte's inaugural moment, the complicating action included an absent parent but in a different way. The move to independence was a personal choice for JeVaunte, and with that choice he was faced with the realization of what it felt like to be on his own rather than with a parent who had always helped him take care of things he needed to do. JeVaunte's story has a similar theme in the complicating action to Alan and Juice, but it was narrated differently.

The ways in which parents shape and intervene in youths' life paths is not fully known (Lareau & Cox, 2011). In research on transitions to adulthood, most studies have focused on outcomes such as graduation, work, marriage, and children (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005) and have not discussed familial capital, that is, how parents deploy advantages to their children. However, becoming an adult is often tied to becoming independent, whether by choice or by circumstance (Arnett, 2001, 2004; Blatterer, 2007; Settersten, 2011). Independence will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

Evaluation. According to Labov (1972), evaluation is one of the most important aspects of stories because it is used to "indicate that point of the narrative, it raison d'être: why it was told and what the narrator is getting at" (p. 366). Evaluation draws attention to interesting aspects of the story and keeps the audience listening. It is closely linked with

the resolution and coda, the result of the narrative for stories told by participants in this study. The resolution and coda are both sometimes present in a narrative, but it is not necessary to have both for the story to be complete (Labov, 1972). They usually show the effect the events (complicating action) had on the narrator.

For Kayla, Marie, and Matt, becoming a parent signaled entry into adulthood, and this was articulated as part of the evaluation in each of their stories of entering adulthood. Marie stated:

> When that happened [pregnancy], it really snapped [me] into reality 'cause I'm not a baby no more. I had one in me. Oh, it's just fun and games, but one day I just woke up, and I'm like, "You're an adult."

Kayla remarked on what having children meant in terms of her social identity and her role as a new adult:

> I mean, when I had them [kids], I just couldn't be a kid no more. I couldn't hang out with my friends whenever I wanted to. I had to pause and be like, "Oh, I got a baby." I had to stay home.

Matt, like many teen fathers, evaluated his entry into adulthood by making "a valiant effort to break the cycle of father absence with their children" (Kiselica, 2008, p. 75). He remarked:

> I had gotten in a little bit of trouble after [I found out she was pregnant], and then I said I ain't gonna be like the father that I had. I'm gonna be there and see my kids. I'm not gonna just say, "Screw my kids," and go do what I wanna do just because. No, that's not me. I'm gonna be the father that I didn't have.

There is a clear link between teen fatherhood and impoverished families and neighborhoods. Entering parenthood is indicative of previous research conducted on transitions to adulthood as a turning point toward or marker of adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Blatterer, 2007; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Settersten, 2011; Thomson et al., 2002). Parenthood is also a contributor to what Jones (2002, 2005) called "fast track" transitions, often resulting in social exclusion. Arnett (1998) connected persons 18 to 25 from lower socio-economic backgrounds as more likely to become parents at a young age, which can feel like a sudden thrust into adulthood.

In the stories of Matt, Marie, and Kayla, becoming a parent is a theme shared across the inaugural moments as complicating action in their respective stories but their evaluations presented here within the narrative differ slightly. In the case of interpreting inaugural moments, I could have missed such similarities and differences in the meaning of similar events for different participants if I had relied solely on thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) and not included structured narrative analysis as well.

Transitions to Adulthood

Having analyzed the stories of inaugural moments for structural elements, I began to consider how I would name the stories and looked for additional themes to help me do that. My interpretations led me to understand the stories of inaugural moments as tales of transition to adulthood that involved change and transformation through what I have come to understand as "accelerated adulthood."

Accelerated adulthood is a term that has been used in research on youth to (a) describe transformation that stems from difficult experiences or hardship that move

young people more quickly into adulthood (Settersten, 2011), and (b) describe prematurely taking on adult responsibilities due to life events that precipitate adulthood (Thomson et al., 2004). I interpreted the stories here as ones that imply accelerated adulthood but take up the term as a combination of both the former definitions. For me, *accelerated adulthood* is a term used to describe transformation that grew from experiences that required the participants in this study to take on adult roles earlier than *they* expected to. However, accelerated adulthood does not adequately capture the socially situated transition to adulthood in the way that Jones' (2002, 2005) term, "fast track" transitions, does. In the next section I provide examples of accelerated adulthood that depict participants' transition to adulthood along the "fast track."

The Fast Track

Henderson et al. (2007) and Thomson et al. (2002) have also turned to reports published by Gill Jones for both grant-funded and government projects in Great Britain (2002, 2005). Jones' work distinguished between slow and fast transitions to adulthood that are associated with socio-economic background and educational level. She described slow track transitions as closely associated with middle-class practices and "typically staying on in post-compulsory education and delaying entry into full-time employment and family formation (often until 30 or later)" (2005, p. 10). Fast track transitions are associated with working-class patterns and

> typically involve leaving education at or before the minimum age, and risking unemployment or insecure and badly paid work. They may also involve early family formation, including teenage pregnancy. The risk of involvement in

> problematic social behaviour offending, abuse of drugs and alcohol is also higher among this group. (Jones, 2005, p. 10)

Jones also posited that youths in fast track transitions usually become socially excluded if they were not already (2002). The stories presented as inaugural moments by participants in this study correspond with transitions to adulthood that are both accelerated and tally with Jones' (2002, 2005) concept of fast track transitions. Moving away from narrative inquiry and towards the language used to move the stories forward, participants phrased their transition to adulthood using the modal verb "had to." For example, Kayla remarked regarding her transition to adulthood and having children, "Like, I had to grow up, because I had these kids, so I had to be an adult for them." Matt related a portion of his transition to age, "but then when I turned 18, I had to do everything pretty much on my own." Booman and Alan referred to having to do things on their own due to the fact that their parents were not around; as Booman explained, "[M]y daddy wasn't helping so I had to do it myself." Alan remembered what it was like to be an adult at an early age, "I didn't have no parents, so I had to feed myself, had to take care of my brothers and sisters." The participants' use of "had to" expresses the responsibility and necessity of becoming an adult. It could be argued that the fact that the participants expressed their movement into adulthood as something they "had to" do, there was little agency involved in that transition. However, calling upon Giddens' (1991) reflexive project of self in this instance opens a space for understanding the sense of personal agency and responsibility that played a part in those fast track transitions for participants.

Parenthood. Having a baby as a teenager can be a transforming event that challenges early adult development (Leadbeater & Way, 2001). Modell (1998) suggested that young people without children are less likely to identify parenthood as an important marker or condition of adulthood, but those with children tend to view becoming a parent a marker of their own transition, implying that in becoming parents young people begin to view parenthood as a condition of adult status. Becoming a parent was cited as entry into adulthood by five of the eight participants who identified as adults and shared inaugural moments. Juice, Kayla, Marie, Matt, and Susan all identified as low-income, had children before the age of 20, and described becoming a parent as their pathway to adulthood.

In the U.S., the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the U.S. has the highest rates of teenage birth of any developed country and that teenage pregnancy is associated with a lower socio-economic background (Ventura et al., 2011). From a societal perspective, having a child as a teenager is viewed as a negative turning point in adolescent development, bringing the teen years abruptly to end (Leadbeater & Way, 2001). Susan, Juice, and Matt described their experiences of becoming parents in just those terms. Susan and Kayla recalled not being able to do the things they used to do and feeling excluded from their friends; in Susan's recollection:

> I feel I became an adult when I had my first child even though I wasn't over the adult age. I was only 17. When you have the kids and you have, like, certain friends and they do certain things, you're not going to be able to do them as much.

> And you should be able to feel good about letting them go for the kids or whatever. It's called growing up.

Likewise, Kayla expressed how she adjusted to being a teenage parent: "After I had him [my child], I just felt like I had to grow up. It was time that I leave my mom, and not be in my mom's house. I just couldn't be a kid no more." Juice remembered maturing through parenthood: "I got pregnant at 16…So, I basically had to grown myself up when I had him. That [motherhood] made me want to mature quicker. I mean, I felt like I was mature for my age, but that just did it." Marie was not a teenage mother, so "fast track" transition may not completely apply here. I included Marie's story with the stories of teenage parenthood because she cited motherhood as her entry into adulthood. Though she does not describe in this structured narrative the events that came next, it is implied that becoming a parent presented a change in her life:

> [I became an adult] three years ago. I was about 23. When I was pregnant with my son in 2008, I think that's when it really hit me, "You're an adult." When that happened [pregnancy], it really snapped into reality 'cause I'm not a baby no more. I had one in me.

Matt was the only male participant with children. He identified as low-income, and rates of teenage fatherhood are the highest among boys who are raised in less than optimal conditions found in poor neighborhoods (Kiselica, 2008). I mention this because teen fathers are an often overlooked group of teen parents who have limited rights if they are unwed and face limited services and resources designed for them as young parents (Jones, 2002; Kiselica, 2008; Settersten & Cancel-Tirado, 2010). Settersten and Cancel-

Tirado (2010) posited that "fatherhood can serve as a catalyst…and bring stability to men's lives by eliminating negative lifestyles" (p. 87). Matt described how he changed and the lifestyle choices he made upon finding out he was going to be a father:

> When I had turned 17, and my ex-girl had said she's pregnant, it changed me. I used to be crazy, like robbing people and catching violent charges and stuff like that. I can't be out here robbing people and going to jail and not being able to see my kid. I've gotta be there for my kid instead of robbing people and ending up in the penitentiary somewhere.

Parenthood for both teenage mothers and teenage fathers, along with leaving high school, pulls them into the fast track transition to adulthood and promotes change that has the potential to lead to social exclusion. However, it is not just parenthood that accelerates adulthood; having to care for others, whether by choice or not, can unintentionally contribute to a fast track transition (Jones, 2002).

Caring for others. Alan and Booman both felt they entered into adulthood at an early age, much like those who identified parenthood as their inaugural moment. Alan recalled having to take care of his brothers and sisters as what led him into adulthood: "My momma was always out doing whatever she did, and I was always with my brothers and my sisters. So taking care of them, I think, that made me become an adult at a young age." Booman referred to becoming an adult as when he "became a man." He recalled standing in the food line to get food to help feed his brothers and sisters, "I think that's when I became a man is when I understood what I was supposed to do." Alan and

Booman took on similar roles as caregivers and providers to younger siblings, which implies being responsible for others forced them to grow up quickly.

The responsibility of caring for others in the way described by Alan and Booman narrate coincides with the responsibilities of care described by the parents in this study, though not necessarily in their inaugural moment narratives. There is an association between caring for others and maturity or being an adult for the majority of participants in this study, including those who did not identify as adults, Blacq' Barbii, Carly, Lisa, Jack, and JeVaunte. In Chapter Six I will take a closer look at caring for others in the construction and performance of adulthood.

The types of events Alan, Booman, Juice, Kayla, Marie, Matt, and Susan described that were captured as inaugural moments were similar. The theme of "parenting"—either becoming a parent or growing up with absent parents—was present in all eight of the stories of inaugural moments of adulthood, including that of JeVaunte. However, as pointed out in his complicating action, JeVaunte included "parent" in a different way than the others who identified as adults. JeVaunte's entry into adulthood was tied directly to the choice of independence rather than fast tracked by becoming a parent or having the responsibility to care for others.

Using Labov's (1972) structured narrative analysis allowed me to unpack such similarities and differences that may not have been captured through thematic analysis alone. An entry from my research journal illustrates how use of Labov's analysis changed my understanding of the participants' experiences:

December 7, 2011

As I started working through the data using structured narrative analysis, I found myself wanting to "blame" the participants' parents for their so-called "lot in life." I wanted to blame their parents for not taking up more time with them as a child, for not being there for them as an emotional support, and for putting them in a position to be a caregiver when what they needed was someone to care for them. I realize these feelings came from my own middle-class understandings of the role of parent should be. As I have come to the end (for now) of the structured narrative analysis, it is interesting to consider how my own thinking has changed. There is still a part of me who finds herself wanting to sit down with the participants' parents and ask them "why," but, now I have come to view many of the inaugural moments the participants discussed as agentic moments in their development and construction of self-identity. So, while I had to resist "blaming" parents earlier, I now look to them as a catalyst for agency and identity in the lives of the participants.

Identifying structural units of inaugural moments described in participants' narratives pushed me to reconsider my reactions to and interpretations of the data.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented my analysis and interpretations of the inaugural moments of adulthood described by eight of the twelve participants. I began with an overview of "inaugural moments," followed by a brief explanation of how I used Labov's (1972) structured narrative analysis to understand the data set. Next, I presented my

interpretation of the data in terms of story structure and structural function, and concluded with a discussion on transitions to adulthood as well as an example of how my own interpretations changed in this process. In the next chapter, I present a poetic re-representation of the construction and performance of adulthood.

Chapter Six

Construction and Performance of Adulthood

The previous chapter presented an analysis and interpretation of inaugural moments of adulthood using Labov's (1972) structured narrative analysis. In this chapter, I present the findings related to the second research question, how 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood. I do so through poetic text (Butler-Kisber, 1998, 2010; Glesne, 1997, 2010; Norum, 2000; Richardson, 1994). Construction and performance of adulthood are re-represented together in this chapter because, as stated in Chapter One, it is my belief that construction cannot be separated from performance. In my analysis, it became all the more evident that construction and performance are analogous because the participants performed adulthood in the way they have constructed it. For this reason, construction and performance remain coupled (Weick, 1976) here as they have throughout this work.

This chapter begins with an explanation of why I chose poetic re-representation, including how I developed the poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997). Next, I connect my interpretations to literature around three prominent themes generated during data analysis and patterned across participant narratives regarding the construction and performance of adulthood: (a) independence, both personal and financial, (b) responsibility, caring for self and role of provider, and (c) age and experience as they relate to defining adulthood. This chapter ends with the poem, "When You Feed Yourself That Means You're Grown," developed as a composite of the participants' narratives regarding construction and performance of adulthood.

While identifying and interpreting common themes across participant narratives is an established tradition in qualitative research (Riessman, 2008) and the fourth step in my analysis process, I did not choose to re-represent the findings this way in this chapter. Originally, I planned to separate construction and performance into two separate chapters and present a thematic analysis of narrative for construction and performance. In beginning that writing process, I realized the voices of the participants were becoming drowned out in the analysis. I stopped writing and reconsidered how I might best re-represent their constructions and performances using their voices and capturing the tenor of self-disclosure that was shared with me.

Because "how we re-present data on the page matters" (Norum, 2000. p. 249), I decided to develop a poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997) to illustrate the construction and performance of adulthood shared across participants' narratives. Glesne (1997) defined poetic transcription as "the creation of poem like compositions from the words of the interviewees" (p. 202) to "get at the essence of what's said, the emotions expressed, and the rhythm of speaking (Glesne, 2010, p. 250). I chose to use poetic transcription because it is my position that poetic approaches take "advantage of the postmodernist moment to examine how we do our work, for whom we write, and the consequences of our activities on ourselves and others" (Richardson, 1994, p. 7) and have ability to appeal to our senses and open up new ways of seeing and knowing (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Poetry, like stories, can be evocative. Moreover, poetic re-representation has the potential to make "findings" in research more accessible to diverse audiences (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000).

Unlike traditional research texts, the poem in this chapter is a blend of the participants' voices and my voice as researcher, which "counteracts the hegemony" found in more traditional forms of representation (Butler-Kisber, 2010. p. 84). I developed what Butler-Kisber (2010) called "poetry clusters." These are clusters of poems around a particular topic or theme that "can tease out nuances that give greater depth to the work" (p. 83). These poem clusters were developed from the words of the participants, but they are my interpretation of those words. The poetic transcriptions were developed in the following manner: (a) Once common themes were identified across narratives, quotes and/or portions of text related to each theme in each participant's narrative were highlighted and moved to a new document; (b) I reread each of the segments and developed a poem for each theme based on my interpretation; (c) I imagined the voices of the participants speaking about how they construct and perform adulthood, and I worked to convey the emotions and reactions felt when hearing the participants' words; (d) the length of each line of the poem was considered, keeping in mind that longer lines of poetry often imply a patriarchal move of power (Finch, 1987); and (e) the clusters of poetry were put together to form one poem with each of the themes woven throughout. It should be noted that the poetic clusters are not the voice of just one participant but the voice of multiple participants. This was done to share the complexity of the construction and performance of adulthood as shared by the participants. Before presenting the poetic transcription, I will connect my interpretations of participants' narratives of construction and performance of adulthood to literature around three prominent themes generated during data analysis and patterned across participant narratives.

Interpretations of "Real Life"

Though not presented here as a theme across the narratives, adulthood was described in many of the narratives shared by the participants as the "real world" and "real life." It is with that delineation in mind that I offer my interpretations. Susan referred to growing up and performing adulthood as "letting some things go" and moving into "real life." I interpreted becoming an adult as overwhelming for many of the participants. Terms such as "real world" and "reality" used to refer to adulthood suggested to me that participants viewed life as getting harder as an adult and more "real" than being a teenager or younger person. This is just one aspect of the layered understandings the participants provided regarding their identity as it related to adulthood. Some wavered back and forth between being an adult and "getting there," while some did not identify as adults but imagined what their adult identity would be like in a few years. This construction and performance of adult identity was captured through a thematic analysis of narrative (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Riessman, 2008) using descriptive and in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2009), which provided a way to note patterns across participants' narratives. Through the analysis, I came to understand that construction and performance cannot be separated because participants' identities are constantly being performed (Butler, 1988) based upon socially constructed reality of what it means to be an adult (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Following are my interpretations and connections to the literature focused around three prominent themes regarding the construction and performance of adulthood at the level of discourse: (a) independence, both personal and financial, (b) responsibility in

caring for oneself and in the role of provider, and (c) age and experience as they relate to defining adulthood. These themes follow the patterns noted in Arnett's (1997) work in which the top two criteria for adulthood cited by emerging adults ages 18 to 21 were "financially independent from parents" and "no longer living in parents' household" (pp.10-11). Because the participants in this study were between the ages of 18 and 25, they fall into the category of what Arnett (2000) termed *emerging adulthood.* Emerging adulthood is thought to be distinct from adolescence and young adulthood in that emerging adults are not constrained by traditional social roles and expectations and are between the ages of 18 and 25. Arnett (2000) labeled it a time of cultural variability, transition, and exploration. The criteria for adulthood cited in Arnett's (1997) work also match the findings of this research and have been part of what has been rated consistently as the top three criteria for adulthood among emerging adults: (a) caring for and accepting responsibility for oneself, (b) making independent decisions, and (c) becoming financially independent (Arnett, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004). The findings in this study related to the construction and performance of adulthood follow this pattern but do not necessarily fit Arnett's assessment of these criteria.

Engagement with Arnett's work and theory of emerging adulthood spawned the idea for this research, and I anticipated this theory would be foundational in the discussion of findings. However, in retrospect, I cannot overlook the fact that Arnett's work, along with the work of others studying *emerging adulthood*, focused on college or college-bound populations that have more resources available to them than the participants in this study have. Arnett (2006a) posited that among emerging adults the

three consistent criteria for adulthood mentioned above were not milestones or transition events but rather the gradual events that eased them into adulthood "sometime in their mid- to late-20s" (p. 12). In Arnett's (2006a) observation, it is during this stage of development that emerging adults "feel as though they are in between adolescence and full adulthood" (p. 12). This assessment does not necessarily fit the population of participants in this study, many of who felt tossed into adulthood without warning. With these considerations in mind, I now offer my interpretations regarding personal and financial independence, caring for oneself and caring for others, and age and experience as they relate to defining adulthood.

Independence

Independence, or being "on your own," was named as a marker of construction and performance of adulthood for all the participants in this study, whether or not they identified as adults. For example Jack, who did not identify as an adult said, "Because I am not independent, I am not an adult," directly tying his adult identity to independence. Tanner (2006) proffered that there is an increasing independence that takes place during the time of emerging adulthood, though the ways in which emerging adults gain that independence, how quickly or by what means, varies. Across participants' narratives, I heard stories and claims of independence discussed in terms of personal and financial independence, often one allowing for the other. For example, Matt referred to independence as "you got to handle everything yourself…bills, where you live, getting a job." Booman remarked, "I would say I was an adult, because I stay on my own. I don't never ask him for nothing. I feed myself. I live my own life. I can't – I don't ask my

momma for nothing really." Both Matt and Booman provided examples of how independence incorporates both personal and financial independence. In this study, Susan described the transition to adulthood by implying that personal and financial independence, the same things posited by Arnett (1998), are what it takes to be an adult. Susan referred to these independences as moving out of a parent's house, paying bills, and working.

Because Arnett's (1998) work has been conducted primarily with participants who identify as middle-class or above, it was interesting to come to know that the concept of financial independence spans social classes. Financial independence is more tangible and more measurable than personal independence or independent decision-making. It is something by which the participants in this study could perhaps measure their progress towards adulthood (Arnett, 1998). They were able to measure their progress through statements like "I feed myself," and "I live my own life," and "I pay my own bills."

Personal independence. Personal independence was referred to by many participants as being "on your own" and was connected to having one's own living space, not asking others for help, and making one's own decisions.

"Being an adult means being able to do stuff on your own" (Kayla).

"When you are an adult you can learn on your own" (Jack).

"When you adult, you living on your own and paying your bills on your own" (Marie).

Here, the construction of adulthood is being able to do things "on your own"; an adult can do things "on [her/his] own." This is directly related to how performance of adulthood is carried out. When the participants were asked whether they considered themselves to be adults and, if so, why, they called upon their constructed meaning of adulthood to respond.

Lisa, for example, did not identify as an adult but still viewed her future performance of adulthood as relating directly to personal independence and being on her own. She considered herself dependent rather than independent and claimed this is what kept her from being an adult. When asked why she did not consider herself an adult, she responded:

> Because the simple fact, I'm not stable, and I'm not taking care of myself right now. I'm not taking care of my child. I am pretty much still in school trying to get my school out of the way. I don't call myself an adult because of all those things would be taken care of, and I would be able to take care of myself, and raise my child on my own.

Kayla, who did identify as an adult, remarked that if she had not left high school she might have been less independent and "living in a college dorm." She continued, "I probably wouldn't have had them [kids] so young and probably wouldn't be living on my own." As noted above, Kayla constructed adulthood as being able to do stuff "on your own." Here Kayla performed adulthood by stating that she lives on her own and recognizes that independence as different from the independence college students have. This also brings to light issues of privilege associated with higher education (Anyon,

1981; Soares, 2007) and opens a space to question how that privilege impacts transitions to adulthood across social classes.

Financial independence. With 10 out of 12 participants identifying as low-income and many of them expressing concerns about being able to get better job once they completed their GED, it seems inevitable that financial responsibility would carry a heavy weight in the narratives regarding adulthood for these participants. Financial independence incorporated, but was not limited to, the following: having bills, being financially responsible/stable, paying bills on time, and needing work to have money because it takes money to live. "Paying bills," an in vivo code referring to financial aspects of construction and performance of adulthood, was tantamount for participants when it came to talking about financial independence. The construction of adulthood was having bills to pay and the performance of adulthood was being able to pay those bills on one's own. Blacq' Barbii referred to financial independence as a marker of adulthood. She did not consider herself an adult, but when asked when she thought she would become an adult she responded:

> Well, if I had a job and was, like, in college or something and paying bills and taking care of myself and my kids…when I can take care of myself and my kids and not having to ask my parents for money when I need something and can pay for things as far as myself and my kids. Just standing on my own two feet and independent. Living on my own, probably, then I'd consider myself an adult.

Blacq' Barbii expected financial independence to transition her to adulthood, while living

on her own would mark her identity as an adult. She expressed that getting her GED would provide her with more money to begin to make these things happen. This construction of adulthood was the same for most of the narrators. Kayla stated adulthood was "[h]aving your own place, having a job, not having to lean on other people, so pay for your bills and stuff," while Booman stated, "I consider myself an adult because I pay bills and I don't depend on nobody really." While construction may be tied to being financially independent and not depending on anyone to "pay your bills," the reality of performing financial independence can be a hard reality.

Other participants who identified as adults commented on a darker side of financial responsibility. This was something different than Blacq' Barbii perhaps envisioned for herself later on. Marie's story is one that stands out:

> Having to take care of yourself, having to take care of your own bills, and then when you have kids, you have to take care of them, and it's just stuff you don't realize is a reality…I wouldn't wanna be here [public housing] the rest of my life or have to go back and live with my parents. [A GED] is something that has to be done 'cause I'm gonna have handouts my whole life and going to ministries and mission centers to get diapers or food. I wanna go do it on my own. Like I get food stamps. One day I wanna be able to go spend $668.00 out of my pocket rather than in food stamps.

Marie, along with Susan, Lisa, Kayla, and Juice, saw financial independence as a marker of adulthood but not one that was necessarily positive. Marie explained her financial independence as something that was challenging but not impossible and

something directly related to social class. For example, as was evident in her role in the ethnodrama, Marie enrolled in GED classes in order to provide a better life for her children. Having children and transitioning into adulthood brought financial independence. However, that financial independence has the potential to stall her if she is not active in pursing her GED. Financial independence has put Marie in three public housing neighborhoods, made her eligible for monthly food stamps, and required that she take "handouts," as she said, in order to get necessities for her children. Kayla discussed the struggle of financial independence she has had:

> Like far as taking care of my kids, I believe if I'd got my diploma or have I would have my GED, it wouldn't be much – as a struggle, financially supporting them because it would probably be easier to get a job. I'm having a hard time getting jobs and stuff like that. It's just a struggle with them.

Stories like Marie's and Kayla's are not uncommon in the transition to adulthood, especially for vulnerable populations such as youths who face multiple challenges and are served by multiple systems, including youths who are school leavers, homeless youths, foster care youths, youths reentering the community from juvenile justice, and youths served by the mental health care system (Osgood et al., 2005; Osgood et al., 2010). As Foster et al. (2005) noted, there is an overrepresentation of poor in the population of vulnerable youth, and this makes the transition to adulthood more difficult than for college-bound middle-class youth. Like many of the participants in this study, these youth, are caught in state systems, such as social welfare and mental health systems, that are more difficult to navigate once they have crossed the arbitrary line of adulthood

because they are now served by adult-focused programs that may or may not meet their specific needs (Foster et al., 2005).

Responsibility

Each of the participants interviewed expressed his or her understanding that adulthood brings with it new responsibilities. In their estimation, an adult was constructed as someone who was "responsible" and had "responsibilities." Jack and Blacq' Barbii referred to being responsible as being able to take care of things as an adult regardless of the age at which anyone becomes an adult. Though Blacq' Barbii, Carly, and Jack did not identify as adults, they all stated that they were aware of what it takes to be an adult.

Performance of adulthood was also marked as having responsibilities. Marie and Susan listed their responsibilities as adults. Susan said, "I take care of home. I cook. I clean. I do laundry. I pay bills and not because I want to, because I have to." Similarly, Marie referred to "…house duties. The bills. It's life, real life. As an adult you have to do it." For Marie and Susan responsibilities came in the form of chores that must be done as an adult. They returned to the language of necessity, using the phrase "have to" in their descriptions.

For other participants, responsibilities were described by differentiating between adult responsibilities and teenage responsibilities. Juice compared the two:

> Like, as an adult, you got responsibilities, got to keep up with your bills, and make sure you take well your child needs are met, and just doing a lot of other stuff, having responsibilities. People, you ain't adults, they got responsibilities, but these are more kiddish responsibilities, like, clean your room and stuff. You

> gotta make sure you get to work, make sure you got kids taken care of, and find a job, and stuff like that to me are adult-like responsibilities.

The comparison made by Juice is an example of how participants constructed adult responsibilities as different from responsibilities they constructed for non-adults.

Caring for oneself and others. Being responsible and having responsibilities were closely connected with the responsibility of caring for oneself and others. Though closely connected to independence, I have chosen to discuss these themes under the heading of responsibility. Alan remarked that he had been taking care of himself since he was a kid "because nobody else was there to take care of me." He explained that it was "being alone and feeling like you have no one will make you grow up." Alan discussed this in depth and related this experience to his need to be an adult at an early age because he was caring for his brothers and sisters. Other participants like Booman stated that being an adult meant "being able to care for yourself regardless if someone else is there or not." JeVaunte explained, "[C]aring for yourself is an adult thing to do," while Matt explained that turning 18 and being a parent means being "forced to care for yourself." Matt's statement mimics what Arnett (1998) found in 18- to 25-year-olds from lower socio-economic backgrounds who felt as though they were rushed into adulthood and forced to care for themselves and their children before they were prepared to do so.

Role of provider. Carrying out the role of a provider and being able to care for others was also interpreted in participants' narratives as part of the construction and performance of adulthood. Being a parent, taking on the role of provider, caring for a child, caring for siblings and even caring for a parent, were described by the participants

as the ways in which they performed adulthood. For some, these were experiences related to the fast track to adulthood mentioned in the previous chapter. These were the experiences that made them "grow up fast" and moved them into adulthood sooner than they expected. As Susan put it, "[S]ome people have no choice" but to become adults. Carly, though she did not identify as an adult, said that caring for her alcoholic mother was an experience that "made her grow up fast." Juice explained her situation:

> My dad has a lot of kids in his life. I was responsible for cooking for them, making sure they fed and stuff like that. Me, being in that situation, made me feel like I'm an adult, because I have to watch after them.

JeVaunte, though not a parent and never asked to care for his siblings, constructed an adult as someone who takes care of others. He commented:

> Being able to take care of your wife, your kids, [and] yourself before you take care of anybody else is being an adult because this comes again with the responsibility of being an adult. If you have a wife and kids, you will have to take care of them. Make sure they have everything they need before you go out and do what you want to do. Make sure they have what they need first, then you can go ahead and have a little fun.

For the parents in the group, and even those who were not but felt as though they were responsible for providing for their siblings, the role of provider was constructed as part of being an adult and, hence, performed. For example, Kayla performed adulthood by providing the basic necessities for her children:

> Like, far as taking care of my kids, I mean I know that I'm a good mother. I do the best that I can. My kids don't starve. They have food. I mean I got a roof over their head. I feel good as an adult, but I struggle with them financially, like Pampers™ and stuff.

The idea of caring for others is not necessarily new to the construction and performance of adulthood. Arnett and Tanner (2011) found that emerging adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds listed being able to support a family and being able to care for a child just behind attaining financial independence as an indicator of adulthood. Osgood et al. (2011) also pointed out that low-income young people without a high school diploma are more likely to become parents at an early age and more likely to relate to becoming a parent as a marker of adulthood than college-bound middle-class youths. For those participants who were parents, making the decision to care for their child over socializing with their friends was part of their performance of adulthood. Matt offered an excellent example when asked how being a parent made him an adult:

> I can't just be out here runnin' around, partyin' and stuff when I got stuff to take care of. I mean, I can't. Like I got kids and stuff I gotta take care of. It's my responsibilities. I mean, there might be certain times, like I get the kids watched or somethin', and I might go out. But I'm just – I can't do that stuff no more. It's just too much. I ain't got everything down pat yet, like responsibilities, like taking care of the kids. I want to get out and go to them parties and stuff, but I got the kids. I can't. But I'm glad I did have the kids, 'cause if I wouldn't of had the

> kids, I probably would have been in the penitentiary right now. So, that's a good thing. It works out better for me.

In this segment of narrative, Matt described how being a parent made him an adult and how he performed adulthood through the decisions he made to stay home with his children rather than go to the parties he would have liked to attend. This element of decision-making is part of the broader concept of responsibility that participants constructed as being an adult and subsequently performed.

Age and Personal Experience

Age and personal experience was another theme than ran across participant narratives. In the United States, age underlies laws and policies that structure education, work, entitlements, and rights. At the same time, society holds common notions about the timing of experiences, roles, and behavior at particular ages (Settersten, 2011). Several participants used the term "of age" in reference to turning 18 and being considered a legal adult. Although age was often mentioned as a marker of adulthood, for many participants its importance was diminished by personal experience. Age was used to reference being an adult though the participants did not view age as a true marker of adulthood.

When asked if there was an age at which someone becomes an adult, the majority of participants responded that the legal age of 18 means a person is an adult but qualified their responses in a personal way. For example, Booman stated, "[T]he federal government says we're adults at age 18. I don't believe the federal government knows anything about anybody. They just put rules, really." Lisa referred to legal age and schooling as a marker of adulthood by saying, "So once you're 18, you're out of school,

you're called an adult." Carly also spoke of age 18 as being a marker of adulthood,

> Well, at age 18, you can legally not have to listen to your parents. You can go out and buy cigarettes and dip and all that stuff. I don't necessarily think that just because you come in here that you're an adult, but you are over the age of 18, so you are legal.

Unlike the other participants cited, Susan viewed age 21 as a salient marker of adulthood. Instead of defining what 21-year-olds do to become adults, she described how those under 21 are not adults:

> I would say 21 and under, they are out of their parents' household, but they still do childlike things, like they don't pay for their own food, they don't do like house things, which you would do when you live on your own. And some are still in school. They are not adults yet.

As Settersten (2011) reported:

> Not surprisingly, 18 and 21 are often given as ages of adulthood because they are embedded in law and signal the acquisition of significant legal rights and responsibilities, such as when one can vote, rink, marry, have consensual sex, serve in the military, or be prosecuted. (p. 171)

Though age 18 was mentioned and considered a marker of adulthood, participants basically found legal age arbitrary. JeVaunte remarked:

> The government defines [adulthood] by age and some people define it by being maturity. I define it as when you stop taking little stuff and getting mad at it and just go on about it and quit getting mad if you can't have something your way.

> Because I know adults, they still do that. They like 35 years old and they still crying about that they can't have their way in certain things.

Alan felt strongly about age and its relation to adulthood:

> I really don't think nobody becomes an adult off of age. I think it's life experiences and what you've been through makes you an adult. Government age is not important when we talk about adults. If you're 18 now and you're still playing and not striving for something and not trying to achieve nothing, I don't feel like you're an adult. But if you are 18 and you're striving for something, then you're working for better things. I feel like you're an adult just because you have goals, and you're trying to set them and you're going to go out there and get it. The government puts that label on you when you're 18 that you're an adult, which is not true.

Experience was thought to have had more to do with being and becoming an adult than age for participants. Booman expressed that being an adult only depends on who a person is. He stated, "Like, I believe somebody can become an adult at age 10 if they had, like, if they went through certain conditions. That's what I believe." Like Booman, Kayla commented on experience meaning more regarding adulthood than age:

> I don't think [adulthood] has nothing to do with age, because some people, probably 30, 40 years old, still acting like big old kids. So it just depends on the person. Some people have to be an adult earlier than 18. Experience has a lot to do with becoming an adult. Like having kids, as far as getting your own place, stuff like that that comes with being an adult.

These examples reveal an awareness of legal age as a socially constructed marker of adulthood that underlie institutions and policies. However, within these examples adulthood is tied more to abstract concepts of responsibility, maturity, behavior, and mentality. For example, Jack remarked:

> There's a certain age to where you can only start making adult decisions. You can't buy a house until you're 18. You can't do this until you're 21, but I think that 'cause you have certain people out there that age-wise are adults, but mentally they're not taking care of their selves. They're lazy. They don't do a lot of things. So therefore they're physically an adult but they haven't really gone through adulthood as far as mentality.

Matt was one of the few participants who mentioned the difference that being "of age" can bring. He described being a teenager versus being an adult in terms of crime and how crimes are weighted once you turn 18:

> When you're 18 and calling some Social Security place or a probation officer or something like that, your parent can't do it for you because you're of age. You've gotta do it yourself. Everything's yourself instead of your parents. Legally you're an adult when you become 18 only because you can enlist in the military and stuff but when I became of age, it's like I had to do everything on my own. When you actually can get stressed out, I think you're an adult. When you're a teenager and somebody talks about you behind your back, you might get mad or whatever but it ain't nothing like when you're an adult. When you're a teenager, if somebody's talking behind your back you can even hit them and get

> away with it. As an adult, you hit somebody for talking about you behind your back, that's a felony assault charge.

Matt not only aligned his adult identity with age but recalled how things changed for him when he came "of age." His personal experience with the criminal justice system framed his understanding of age and adulthood in terms of criminal charges. This excerpt from Matt's narrative brings the conversation on age and personal experience full circle, demonstrating the impact personal experience has on construction and performance of adulthood.

There is agency in narration and in constructing personal meanings of adulthood (Shanahan, 2000). Despite the fact that many of the participants related adulthood to age because, as JeVaunte put it, "The government says you're an adult when you're 18," the expectations of what is to happen upon that legal entry into adulthood was disrupted in this study by the agency taken up by participants in describing their own experiences of adulthood and creating their own adult identities. The construction and performance of adulthood for participants in this study align with Côtè's (2000) suggestion that significance of traditional age markers has declined, being replaced by emotional and cognitive maturity. I would add that traditional age markers are also being replaced by a push back against the system that some young people feel has trapped and defined them. The construction and performance of adulthood by participants in this study creates a space to consider how the "criteria that define adulthood have individualized and now rest primarily on subjective self-evaluations" (Shanahan et al., 2005, p. 226). The way in which they, as 18- to 25-year-olds, viewed adult status in terms of individualistic criteria

that reflect personal attributes and agency laid a foundation for their construction and performance of adulthood. Transition markers such as graduation, marriage, and school did not hold great weight with these participants when constructing adulthood; instead, the construction and performance was related to personal experience. I now turn to "When You Feed Yourself That Means You're Grown" and, as always, invite alternative interpretations and understandings in the reading of this poetic re-representation.

When You Feed Yourself That Means You're Grown

Being an adult means the real world.
Growing up,
Getting a job,
Taking care of yourself,
Feeding yourself,
Not depending on anybody,
Getting something for your own self,
Getting your own goals accomplished,
Not leaning on the next person,
Not asking them for nothing,
Being able to do everything by yourself,
Getting new attachments, letting some go.

I'm mature enough to handle my business
And
Do whatever I gotta do.
I can step out in the real world,
Get a job,
And
Provide for myself and my son.

Being an adult is being a grown person with responsibilities.
Working,
Taking care of home,
Having kids,
Having a job.

I take care of home.
I cook.

I clean.
I do laundry.
I pay bills.
Not because I want to, because I have to.
The house duties,
The bills,
It's life, real life.
As an adult, you have to do it.
Being an adult is being able to take care of things,
Handling everyday problems,
Taking care of your wife,
Your kid, and
Yourself.

I got responsibilities.
All kinds of bills,
Kids to take care of,
And
A job to keep.

Independence, independence equals adult.
Only depending on yourself,
Getting your own place,
Living on your own,
Not being in the house with your mother,
Not having to lean on other people.

I ain't really never had nobody.
I didn't really have nobody take care of me like most kids had.
I probably been taking care of myself my whole life.
So I consider myself an adult.
I'm feeding myself.
I survive on me.
I don't depend on nobody else but me.

Being an adult means paying your bills and paying your own way.
Owning everything that you have,
A car,
Your house,
Washer and dryer,
TV,
And
Having everything paid off, even bills.

I pay bills.
I don't depend on nobody, really.
I'm the man,
The woman of the house,
The breadwinner,
I'm all of it.

Being an adult means being a role model.
Showing your kids how they should act,
Setting an example for the youth,
Teach them,
Tell them how to act,
How to talk,
How to respect,
How to do things.

Being an adult is a mental state.
Making adult decisions,
Having your head on right,
Being able to make good decisions,
Using wisdom in all things you do,
Using knowledge,
Not making crazy mistakes,
Accepting responsibly for the things that
you do and that you don't do
Being able to go out there,
And
Face the world correctly.

I make decisions on my own.
I know what I want to do with my career.
I'm pressing toward that goal.
I've already planned out my life.
I'm looking for a job.
I'm getting my GED.
I'm ready to take on anything.

Adulthood is a stage of life.
When you hit a certain age, like after 21 or 22, you an adult.
You grown,
You fully grown,
You not a kid no more.

When you grow up and become an adult,
You're not under your parents' care anymore.
You have your own bills.
You're supposed to tell yourself to eat, take a bath, and go to bed
Because
You can't be told to do that no more.

Some people define adulthood by maturity.
I define it as when you stop getting mad if you can't have something your way.
The government defines adult by age.
You can't buy a house until you're 18 or you can't do other stuff until you're 21.
Age 18 is when adulthood is supposed to start,
But it never does.
Nobody becomes an adult off of age.
It all depends on who you are.

Some people have to be an adult before 18.
Some people have to act older than they are.
My friend had a kid when she was 14.
She had to grow up.

Experience, it has a lot to do with becoming an adult.
Life experiences
And
What you've been through
Makes you an adult.

I know people 13, 14,
Pocket full of money,
Taking care of theyself.
They're feeding theyself.

I'm over 18.
I have responsibilities.
I was forced to become an adult.
Because
There's kids at home I've gotta go take care of.
But,
I don't really wanna be an adult yet.
Now that I know what an adult life is,
I just wish I was younger again.

Age is not important when we talk about adults.
If you haven't been through nothing, you can't really say you're an adult.

I'm not stable.
I'm not taking care of myself right now.
I'm not taking care of my child.
If I was an adult all those things would be taken care of,
I would be able to take care of myself,
And
Raise my child on my own.

I don't have a job.
I don't have money.
I'm not too much sure how to raise a baby just yet.
I'm still learning.
I'll be an adult
When
I'm picking up my responsibilities,
Handling them on my own,
And
Feeding myself.
When you feed yourself that means you're grown.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings related to the second research question and chose to keep construction and performance together because it is my belief that construction cannot be separated from performance. The chapter began with an explanation of why I chose poetic re-representation, including how I developed the poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997). Next, I connected my interpretations to literature around three prominent themes generated during data analysis and patterned across participant narratives regarding the construction and performance of adulthood: (a) independence, both personal and financial, (b) responsibility, caring for self and role of provider, and (c) age and experience as they relate to defining adulthood. This chapter ended with the

poem, “When You Feed Yourself That Means You’re Grown,” developed as a composite of the participants’ narratives regarding construction and performance of adulthood. In Chapter Seven, I explicate my conclusions, discuss the implications of this work, and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter Seven

Discussion, Implications, Future Research

The previous chapters presented the details of this research, including data collection, data analysis, and findings, along with my own interpretations and reader responses that implicitly point to potential implications of this work. This final chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by a broad discussion of the findings, possible implications of this research, and suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation research was to explore the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, and their construction and performance of adulthood through narrative. The research questions that guided this study were: (a) What is the lived experience of adult basic education students, ages 18 to 25, transitioning as adult learners? and (b) How do 18- to 25-year-old adult basic education students construct and perform adulthood? This study was designed to address the changing meaning of adulthood for youths matriculating into adult basic education programs and to foster new understanding of the changing meaning of adulthood as it is fundamental to developing programs and policies that will address the needs of these younger learners (Wyn & White, 2000). Narrative inquiry and narrative analysis were used to explore the lived experience of the participants as well as their construction and performance of adulthood. This study's research questions, my position as researcher, theoretical and methodological choices, and the cultivated relationship with the sites and participants

informed my analysis, interpretations, and what I have come to view as implications of this work.

Twelve GED students, ages 18 to 25, enrolled in local non-profit adult education programs were interviewed individually regarding their experiences of leaving high school, transitioning into an adult education program, and their construction and performance of adulthood. A semi-structured interview protocol guided each interview, and participation in the study was voluntary. Follow-up, member-checking interviews (Glesne, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Roulston, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) were conducted with five of the twelve participants. Data analysis was carried out at multiple levels across the data set, which included interview transcripts, field notes, and my research journal. The formal data analysis consisted of five distinct steps: (a) pre-coding, (b) chronology, (c) structured narrative analysis (Labov, 1972), (d) thematic analysis, and (e) code mapping data iterations.

Layered re-representations were used to present the findings, including ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2005), story structure and structural function, and poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997). Though each participant's lived experience was different, all of the participants shared the experience of leaving high school and transitioning into GED classes. Their stories were anchored by shared feelings of lost ambition, regret, restored hope, and new understandings. Structured narrative analysis (Labov, 1972) of plot structure, complicating action, and evaluation suggested that teenage parenthood and the responsibility of caring for others moved participants along the fast track transition to adulthood (Jones, 2002). Finally, thematic analysis of participants' chronological

narratives led to interpretations around three prominent themes regarding the construction and performance of adulthood: (a) independence, both personal and financial, (b) responsibility, caring for oneself and in the role of provider, and (c) age and experience as they relate to defining adulthood.

Below I present a discussion of the broad findings of this research as they pertain to (a) participants' experiences in high school and adult education, (b) their transitions to adulthood along the fast track influenced by what was described as an inaugural moment, and (c) their construction and performance of adulthood. In doing so I ask readers to keep in mind that what I write about and speak about as "findings" of this research are not generalizable absolutes. Instead, the findings "represent a complex narrative that speaks about how the researcher and the participants are socially and politically located and positioned" (Dei, et al., p. 252). Because I called upon Giddens' (1979) theory of structuration (1979, 1984) to frame this work, I make connections to this theory when applicable. After a discussion of the findings, I suggest implications for practice and policy before making recommendations for future research and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Discussion of the Findings

When I began this study, thought participants might help me frame a new way of understanding adult development. I anticipated being able to say, "The construction and performance of adulthood in 18- to 25-year-old GED students is carried out in these ways…" However, this was not the case. As Knowles (1980) implied, I found that adult identity is socially constructed and individually performed. I did not come away from this

study with a completely new view of adult development or a model into which I can fit the participants' experiences and transitions to adulthood. What I did come away with was an even stronger urge to dissect and critique the models of development currently called upon in adult education.

I have come to understand that adulthood is an ambiguous and uncertain period of life made up of multiple disconnected routes. The interviews I conducted did not support popular theories of development that sanction young adulthood as a sequential period of developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1962), or developmental stages (Erikson, 1973), or a time of redefining relationships (Levinson, 1986). The interviews did not reflect age-graded normative development markers (Neugarten, 1976) and did not entirely support Arnett's (2000, 2001, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) theory of emerging adulthood as a time of cultural variability, leisure, and avoidance of work. Instead, the interviews revealed a disruption of the traditional development sequences that psychologize the meaning of adulthood, allowing social factors to determine the sequence of development, when transitions to adulthood occur, and how adulthood is constructed and performed.

The findings from this study point to an understanding of adulthood that acknowledges some of the same markers of adulthood laid out in development theories but in the case of the participants in this study, their narratives reveal that those markers are being met outside of what is considered the normative stages of development. The following conclusions were drawn from the findings of this study: (a) adulthood is accelerated for some youths depending upon circumstances, structures, and agency, (b) construction and performance of adulthood are analogous, structurally produced and

culturally framed, and (c) life experience and financial independence, rather than age, are deemed the most important factors in reaching adulthood. It is my hope that readers will appreciate the importance school experiences, social structures and agency, and personal and financial independence bring to the construction and performance of adulthood for participants in this study.

Through participants' narratives, I came to understand that practical consciousness and discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984) are part of the construction and performance of adulthood. Practical consciousness was evident in participants' construction of adulthood when they noted age, independence, and traditional markers. These descriptions were part of their practical consciousness, what they had been socialized to understand as routine or socially nuanced. Their performance of adulthood was described in detail via their discursive consciousness. This, however, did not result in ontological security, in which consciousness, time and space, and structuration came together to construct personal identity. For some participants, there was a tension exhibited between practical and discursive consciousness when they discussed wanting to go back to being a teenager or being forced into adulthood before they were ready. Though they identified as adults, Giddens (1984) would contend the tension that exists does not demonstrate security in the personal reality created hence, delaying ontological security.

Findings from this study suggest that for high school leavers, structures such as education, teachers, and teacher-student relationships play an important part in youth transitions out of high school, into adult education, and into adulthood (McGrath, 2009).

Despite the fact that this research focused primarily on the construction and performance of adulthood and that the interview protocol (Appendix D) focused on understandings of adulthood, I found that the participants framed their narratives in terms of their educational experiences. This is not unusual for adult basic education students (Beder, 1990, 1991; Belzer, 2004; Drayton & Prins, 2011; Quigley, 1992, 1997; Rogers, 2004; Rogers & Fuller, 2007) and, as I see it, educational experiences, particularly high school leaving, have played a significant part in participants' development and transitions to adulthood. I consider the educational experiences that they shared to be a framework for participants' understandings' of adulthood and important to the findings in this research. The participants' narratives expressed their feelings about high school, their relationships with teachers there, their feelings toward instruction, and how they interacted with other students. There is a need to acknowledge these educational structures in order to "help identify ways in which these can be rendered more positive for youth considering leaving high school" (McGrath, 2009, p. 97). In my view, a dissonance exists between the experienced reality of school and the assumptions made by teachers, administrators, policy makers, and even researchers.

While I do not intend to present new data in this chapter, I will include responses from both Elizabeth, the director at Pathways, and Caitlyn, the GED instructor at Pathways, who read this work as it was being written. Their interpretations offer a perspective from the field relevant to the findings. In response to earlier chapters in this dissertation, Caitlyn discussed her worry and discouragement regarding the way her students at Pathways viewed themselves:

> I wish more people would recognize the systemic inequality that exists in our education system. I fear that the gulf is growing ever wide. It scares me that we now have politicians talking about dismantling the public education system. I get so discouraged for the future of so many of my students who see themselves as members of an underclass with no opportunity for upward mobility. (Personal communication, October 3, 2011)

Caitlyn's comments speak to the way in which the rhetoric of neo-liberal governments suggests structures of race, class, and gender are giving way to personal choices when, in practice, social and cultural capital continue to be hindered by these inequalities (Holland & Thomson, 2009). For the participants in this study, there was agency in the decision to leave high school but, as they articulated, that decision had consequences such as limited work and education opportunities. Such agentic moments have the potential to lead to greater personal and financial independence but, for them as high school leavers, education and employment surfaced as the two main structures by which they were challenged. This is also an example of the duality of structure discussed by Giddens (1984). While the participants took up agency in their decision to leave school, they were also constrained by the structures in place that limited their mobility into and within the workforce. Enrolling in GED classes demonstrates personal agency that, in turn, leads to more agentic moments within existing or newly created structures because choices available after obtaining a GED have the potential to be less limited due to the participant's completion of what is considered to be equivalent to a high school diploma (Maralani, 2011).

The narratives re-represented through ethnodrama, presented in Chapter Four and confirmed during the reader's theater, denote that "an educator's perceived lack of interest in students sends a powerful message to some youth that school can do without them" (Dei, et. al., p. 250). This is what many of the participants described in Scenes One and Four regarding the differences between high school and adult education. They spoke of GED class being "different from high school" (Alan) and discussed the ways in which "GED teachers actually care and want you to succeed" (JeVaunte). Juice said, "Sometimes some teachers care, and some teachers don't care." JeVaunte expressed similar feelings, "In high school they [teachers] don't care, they just want to get paid." I believe sites like Pathways and the ALC are important for many high school leavers and are a vitally nurturing part of their educational experiences. Elizabeth, the director of Pathways, expressed her views regarding the role Pathways plays in the lives of the students. She remarked that there is a fine line between being too nurturing and not nurturing enough, as "either extreme can be a barrier to students progressing." She went on to say, "I have learned that students don't necessarily need me to understand [where they come from] but they need me to care" (Personal communication, September 29, 2011).

There is much to be learned regarding this aspect of care for high school instructors and administrators, as well as for adult education practitioners and program planners. I have learned in my career as an adult basic education practitioner that for students knowing an instructor or administrator cares about them can make the difference in a earning a GED or not. Much like Belzer (2004) reported, the findings in this study

revealed to what extent the participants' prior experiences weighed on their expectations of what adult education would be like. They expressed that the care, which they did not receive in high school, was appreciated and, to some extent, needed when they got to adult education class.

Findings from this study are also directly tied to the inaugural moments of adulthood described in participants' narratives, which are centered on responsibility, specifically on parenthood and caring for others. These findings suggest that adulthood is accelerated for some youths depending upon circumstances, structures, and agency. It is important to explore inaugural moments because they provide a way to capture how social and economic environments frame individual narratives and the personal and cultural resources on which young people are able to draw. Inaugural moments demonstrate "the centrality of identity and subjectivity to an understanding of transitions, without reducing the analysis to individual psychology" (Thomson et. al., 2002, p. 351). The participants' stories of entering adulthood depict a more layered transition than has yet been described by most developmental theorists and make apparent that the "fast track" is the way some young people reach adulthood regardless of whether or not they are ready.

The lived experiences shared throughout this research indicate that construction and performance of adulthood are analogous, structurally produced, and culturally framed. Structure and agency were found to be present not only in education but also in participants' inaugural moments of adulthood. Race, class, and gender are structures that can influence how and when people consider themselves to be adult. Nine out of twelve

participants identified as African American, and all but two identified as low-income. These demographics reiterate the overrepresentation of low-income youths and youths of color in vulnerable populations (Foster, et al., 2005). This is an important finding because personal narratives and life stories have the potential to become highly politicized in that how "we understand and interpret the ways that people talk about themselves has consequences for where we locate the burden of social justice" (Holland & Thomson, 2009, p. 453). Low-income emerging adults of color have been found to have an earlier sense of adulthood than White emerging adults due to the fact that they grew-up with more family responsibilities in childhood and adolescence (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Phinney, 2000 as cited by Arnett, 2003). For this reason, social class, gender, race, and ethnicity structures are important in developing an understanding of transitions to adulthood because transitions are "structurally produced as well as culturally framed" (Quinn, 2010, p. 124).

The findings of this study suggest the same. Race, class, and gender structures framed the transitions to adulthood described by the eight participants who identified as adults, particularly as the structures related to accelerated adulthood. Alan and Booman, African American males who identified as low-income and middle class respectively, described how at an early age they shouldered responsibility for their siblings and how that made them feel like adults while still quite young themselves. Juice, Kayla, Marie, Matt, and Susan all identified as low-income, had children before the age of 20, and each described becoming a parent as his or her pathway to adulthood. Though becoming a parent is not traditionally viewed as "necessary" for becoming an adult, Arnett (2001)

found that emerging adults who had become parents often stated that "becoming a parent vaulted them suddenly and irrevocably into adulthood" (p. 73). These findings lend support to Arnett's conclusion.

When exploring the construction and performance of adulthood in this study, another important finding is that that age is irrelevant when considering what makes someone an adult. Instead, life experience and financial independence, rather than age, are deemed the most important factors in reaching adulthood. In postmodernity, class differences alongside race and gender, surpass age as an important social division (Hunt, 2005). However, adult basic education includes a group of people who did not follow traditional paths through school, whether determined by school, family, or the age-graded nature of schooling. These students left school before the normative ages of school completion and often re-entered school at nontraditional ages (Maralani, 2011). In the view of these participants, who model Alan's conclusion that "government age is not important when we talk about adults," age no longer marks entry into adulthood. Society has an impact on the way age is viewed by multiple groups; however, there are still perceptions about the "appropriate ages" at which life experiences should take place. Giddens (1984) commented on these *markers*:

> Social identities, and the position-practice relations associated with them, are 'markers' in the virtual time-space of structure. They are associated with normative rights, obligations and sanctions, which within specific collectives, form roles. The use of standardized markers, especially to do with the bodily attribute of age and gender, is fundamental in all societies… (p. 282-3)

The agency that exists in the personal construction of adult identity is dominated by the institutionalized norms and values legitimized in American society. While the participants in this study acknowledged that there were certain privileges that could be gained based upon legal and biological age, they were adamant that age does not define an adult—experience does.

Construction and performance were not separated in the course of this study. Through analysis of participants' stories, construction and performance came to be even better understood as analogous because participants performed adulthood in the way they had constructed it. In the cases where participants did not identify as adults, their understanding of what would make them an adult (i.e. what they would need to perform to consider themselves adults) was a reiteration of how they constructed adulthood. In light of Giddens' (1984) work, the question raised for me is, What structural constraints affect the construction and performance of adulthood in the participants' everyday lives?

Central to participants' constructions and performances of adulthood was their ability to achieve personal and financial independence. How quickly these types of independence were achieved was based on how the participants navigated the social structures they faced, which included education, race, and class (Miles, 2000). Returning to school to complete a GED is one example of navigating structures to achieve the types of adult independence participants described. The irony here is that financial independence has the potential to lead to personal independence (i.e. living on one's own) but financial independence is more difficult to achieve without a high school diploma or GED (Tyler, 2003). Thus, by claiming personal and financial independence as

a construction of adulthood, those participants who did not fully identify as adults exercised agency in their decision to return for a GED. They navigated the interconnectedness of education, employment, and social class structures.

To summarize, the participants expressed a variety of experiences that made up the process of becoming adult whether or not they identified as such. They adamantly swore off age markers but included more traditional markers such as leaving home, finding work, and caring for a family, even if these markers did not happen sequentially. For some participants, adulthood came quickly and without warning; for others, it was described as a slow process, one that kept them moving forward most of the time but sometimes had them wishing they, as Matt described, "could be a kid again." Regardless of the path each participant described taking to what they constructed to be adulthood, the consensus was that life experience is what matters most when considering adulthood.

It is apparent that development cannot and should not be packaged as a normative way of understanding as adulthood is a social construct and situated within social, political, cultural, and historical structures and that "no single experience renders one an adult" (Settersten, 2011, p. 189). I argue that the importance of this study's findings is not found by focusing on which adult development model is more attractive, fits the greatest norms, or can best help adult educators understand their students, but rather that the importance is in the lived experience of the participants and how structures such as education, race, and class influenced how they constructed and performed adulthood. Just as "there is not a rite or event that signifies unambiguously that a younger person has attained adult status" (Arnett, 2001 p. 73), development cannot be encapsulated within

one model or generalized across race, class, and educational level. Personal experience, construction, and performance supersede any specific model of psychosocial development. It is through stories of lived experience that the very individualized and particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991) process of development may best be understood. In addition, as adult educators better understand how personal experiences such as school leaving and accelerated adulthood influence development in younger students, the better they can serve the changing demographic matriculating into adult basic education programs. The findings presented here set up interesting implications for practice and policy. The following section discusses what I consider to be important implications of this research.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The implications for this type of research are not offered as monumental shifts in understanding. Instead, these implications begin at the local level and have the potential to address grand change. It is better to improve understanding of transitions to adulthood in the particular (Abu-Lughod, 1991) rather than attempt to make generalizations that have the potential to be universally misapplied (Pollock, 2008). Change should begin at the local level and come in small increments. I believe one of the best ways to instigate change is through personal narratives like the ones presented here. Young adults are what Knowles (1973) referred to as a "neglected species," and more time should be spent meeting their needs (Darkenwald & Knox, 1984, p.100), particularly as those needs pertain to high school leavers. High school leavers are at an ever-increasing disadvantage (Smith, 1984) due to education and economic reforms and the continual stigma and

stereotyping attached to not graduating from high school. Next, I will discuss the implications for practice and policy in meeting the needs of this population.

Practice. Because the participants in this study constructed and performed adulthood in a way that makes personal and financial independence paramount, and because the findings suggest that those who did not identify as adults did so because they were not financially independent or still live at home, GED programs need to begin thinking about the next step for students after they obtain their GED. Due to the way funding is provided, when a student enrolls in a GED class, the student's short-term and long-term goals are reported via The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), which is an outcome-based reporting system for the state-administered, federally funded adult education programs. Usually, GED programs will mark a student's goal as "obtain GED" rather than "employment." In my experience, this is due to the fact that the NRS funds programs based upon the goals students meet, and many programs that provide GED services lack the resources to provide services beyond a GED. Based on the findings here, which indicate personal independence and financial independence are important, I suggest that focusing on extended services for GED students is a way to help them move from GED to the workforce or higher education. This move would also help them gain the independence and financial freedom they are seeking in their move toward adulthood.

As Darkenwald and Knox (1984) proposed, an approach to program planning that is "comprehensive, responsive to their lifestyles, and takes multiple internal and external influences into account" has been known to be a successful approach for programs that

serve younger adult learners (p. 102). Based on the participants' narrative presented in Chapter Four, "Unraveled, Untold Stories," GED classes are a welcome change from traditional schooling. Students feel more appreciated and are able to witness their own progress. This illustrates the need for programs to find ways to offer one-on-one learning experiences for students every day in the classroom from instructors who seem like they care, treat them differently than high school teachers, and do not use high school discipline in the adult education classroom. There is a call for practitioners to be sensitive to student stories, create a flexible learning environment, set clear expectations, provide relevant and appropriate curriculum for adult learners (Quigley, 1997), and be aware of resources available to students, particularly those students transitioning to adulthood.

Policy. It is not surprising that a group of GED students like the participants in this study have not necessarily met normative age markers of development. More consideration should be given to the resources that are available for people who "hit those marks" at a younger age. The more important questions to ask may be, What type of system and services are in place for them? How can adult education and its connection to workforce development, social services, grant funding, and so on, create change? This is a place where policy might intervene and focus on college recruitment and retention for this group (Maralani, 2011). Policy makers have recently focused their attention on programs designed for the early years in a child's life, just before he/she enters public school. I contend it is important to also offer services and support networks for youths who are in transition to an early adulthood, much like some of the participants in this study. Social institutions and structures need to be refashioned to better reflect the

changing nature of adulthood because "whether by choice or circumstance, adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends" (Settersten & Ray, 2010, p. 36). First, social institutions and government agencies should acknowledge and address the lack of resources for those identified as "vulnerable populations." Once the lack of resources is addressed, as well as what resources are needed, services and programs can be implemented without age limitations and with integrated youth and adult systems.

Recommendations for Future Research

Adult educators have long called for a deeper understanding of the lifeworld of adult learners (Freire, 1970; Fingeret, 1983; Welton, 1995). I, too, call for future research that will promote deeper understanding of the lived experiences of adult basic education students, marginalized youths, and their transitions to adult education and then to higher education or the workforce. Recent neo-liberal agendas and globalization make it necessary to call for more critical studies of marginalized adult education student populations that focus on the impact cultural institutions (Plumb, 2005) use to legitimize certain ideologies, productions of knowledge, and social formations, such as low-skilled labor. It is important to question whether these political and cultural agendas have the potential to impact adult student development because they are built to "maintain the existing class, race, and gender structures of society" (Kaufmann, 2000, p. 433). Perhaps critical research in this area, combined with an interdisciplinary approach, might aid in (a) dismantling the stigma attached to leaving high school and getting a GED, and (b) increasing adult basic education practitioner awareness of the current policies and structures that the younger population of adult education students struggles to navigate.

Studying transitions has gained popularity in adult education (Simpson & Cieslik, 2007; Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006) over the last decade. Many of the discussions have focused on transitioning adult learners to the workforce or, less often, into higher education. The discussions about adult education have also focused on systemic and institutional practices of adult transitions rather than on the social practices of transitioning to adulthood. The concept of transitions to adulthood is not new in the fields of sociology and youth studies, and it has recently gained popularity with economists and social demographers (Arnett, 1997; Furstenberg, 2000; Furstenberg et al., 2004; Osgood et al., 2005). The next step is to initiate more interdisciplinary collaboration around the topics of transitions to adulthood and the constructions and performances of adulthood. Collaboration can be a powerful tool in disseminating information to the largest audience. Though each field mentioned above may take a different approach to research, they have common interests and overlapping stakes in the potential findings of such efforts.

The findings in this study offer partial support of Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood. I agree with Arnett and his colleagues in their response to critics and urge more research in the area of emerging adulthood for populations other than those from economically developed countries who are college-bound and primarily middle class (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011). After encountering some criticism that emerging adulthood was a White, middle-class model of development, Arnett (2003) and Arnett and Tanner (2011) opened up their work to explore emerging adulthood across social classes. Arnett (2003) noted that social class was related to self-perceptions of adulthood in that emerging adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds viewed

themselves as adults or having reached adulthood earlier and more often than participants from higher socio-economic backgrounds. While I would agree with Arnett that social class may be related to self-perceptions of adulthood, I would also suggest, in agreement with Giddens, that the class structure divide between the "have" and "have-nots" influences life chances (Giddens, 1991). In North America there is a widening gap between wealthy and poor (Sklar, 2007) and a rising number of "'underclass' comprised of those people 'under' the class structure who are economically, politically, and socially marginalized" (Hunt, 2005, p. 42). Because ten out of twelve of the participants in this study identified as low-income, the data collected through this research also led me to believe there is a pronounced need for research regarding the role of social class on construction and performance of adulthood and on transitions to adulthood, particularly for high school leavers.

It is important for researchers to continue to include more student perspectives and experiences in research. We need to heed the advice of GED students and get their stories out to middle school and high school students, "So they won't give up." Teachers need to hear their stories, not the stories that objectify GED students as "down and out," but the stories of school leaving and regret. Like the participants here, I imagine there are others with similar stories. I urge the use of more qualitative research methods focused on emerging adults, and note that qualitative methods such as interviews "provide a vivid understanding of the variance that exists among emerging adults" (Arnett, 2006b, p. 327) and also provide an understanding of the layered accounts and variance that exist among 18- to-25-year olds. Positive response to "Unraveled, Untold

Stories" affirms my belief that performance texts make research more accessible. I encourage continuation of performance when doing and presenting research.

In closing, there is much that has been written, interpreted, repeated, and re-represented in the text of this dissertation. It is important to me to let readers know that no matter how methodical I was in handling this data set and no matter how thoughtful I was in my re-representations of participants' stories and experiences, my interpretations were bound by the process of research and only re-represent one possible way of understanding. As I have advocated throughout this dissertation, I invite multiple interpretations and alternative understandings.

Epilogue

Adulthood

When i was young i wanted money
fame and fortune
i wanted to be in love
i wanted a home
a car, a kid or two running around
when i was young i wanted too much.

As time goes by i grew up
not having anything i used to want
i am now a man wishing i could be a kid again
because being an adult can be difficult
it has it good days and bad days as well
but i don't have the luxury of messing up.

i use to hate being told what to do
use to hate waking up everyday and going to school
but now i wake up every day and go to work
and come home to do home work
and my time is no longer my own
for when you're grown you got so much to do.

i think back to the old days
and sometimes wish i could go back
be innocent again, without any worries
have fun, without huge consequences
but i cant do this, so i will have to stop day dreaming
and finish getting all i want and all i dream of
once this happens being an adult will be the best.

- Larry Settles

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Script

Hi. My name is Amelia and I am PhD student at the University of Tennessee. I am doing a research project that involves interviews with adult students like you who are transitioning to a GED program. All of the students I am interviewing are between the ages of 18-25. I am interested in finding out what the term "adulthood" means to new GED students and finding out when they think they became an adult. There will be one main interview that might take a couple of hours. Then, there will be one follow-up interview that is shorter where I will ask questions to make sure I understood your answers in the first interview. There are no benefits or risks to doing an interview but it would really help me out if you wanted to be interviewed. I believe that through hearing and witnessing stories, practitioners will gain insight into the types of educational experiences GED students like you may have had and how the gendered, racial, cultural, and social roles shape our experience with education. It is my hope that information from your interview and information from interviews with other people will give me the opportunity as a researcher to use that information in a way that changes the understanding of adulthood that many teachers and researchers have. Of course, this is voluntary, so if you agree to be interviewed and then decide you don't want to be interviewed, you can tell me and stop at any time. It is completely confidential. No one will know that you interviewed unless you tell them. Your real name won't be used either. You will get to choose a name for yourself. Would you like to participate?

Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

{Printed on university letterhead}

Title: Transition to Adult Learner

Who I am and why this research.
The Principal Investigator, C. Amelia Davis in Adult Learning at the University of Tennessee is researching the experience of adult basic education students, ages 18-25, transitioning, as adult learners the River County area. You are invited to participate in this research by taking part in a one-on-one interview with the researcher.

What does your involvement entail?
If you agree to take part in this study, the researcher will contact you to set up an interview schedule. Interviews will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you and will last about an hour. In the interview, you will be asked to share your experiences. The researcher will meet with you a second time for a brief interview to clarify understanding of any responses from the first interview. After both interviews are complete, the researcher will send you a copy of the interview transcript and a summary of the key points. She will speak with you after you receive these to see if you have any modifications or additions to what you have said in the interviews.

Risks to you during research.
This research has minimal risk. The researcher does not expect any harm to come to you because of your participation in this research. All interview data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office of the researcher. All electronic data will be password protected and digitally recorded interviews will be erased once they are transcribed.

Each digitally recorded interview will be transcribed by the researcher or a hired transcriber. The transcriber will sign a pledge of confidentiality before beginning any transcription. When the transcriptions are made, all references that might identify you will be removed and the corresponding transcript will be given a fake name. Data and identifying information will be kept separate as not to link you to this study.

Will you benefit from your participation?
There are no direct benefits from participation in this research although you may benefit from participation because you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experience, beliefs and values regarding education. Your story may help you better understand aspects of yourself or your education that you had not considered before. Although the findings cannot be generalized, a description of your experiences may benefit students and instructors in adult basic education.

_____ Participant Initials (page 1)

Your participation is voluntary.
Your participation will begin only after you have reviewed and signed the Consent Form and received the answers to any questions you may have for the researcher. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop participation at any time for any reason.

All research remains confidential.
All data materials remain confidential, and your name will not be attached to any data. Pseudonyms will be used for all people, proper nouns, and identifiable events. No references will be made which could link participants to the research. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office of the Principal Investigator. All electronic data will be password protected.

Contact Information
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact Amelia Davis (252-814-5665) or Dr. Ralph Brockett (telephone), at the University of Tennessee Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling (telephone). If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Research Compliance Services section of the Office of Research at (telephone).

CONSENT

I have read the above information, and I have received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C: Participant Demographic Form

Age: _____

Gender:

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Other _____

Race and Ethnic Background (Choose one):

- ○ American Indian
- ○ Alaskan Native
- ○ Asian
- ○ Black, African American, African Descent
- ○ Hispanic origin or descent
- ○ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ○ White
- ○ Other _____

What was the last grade you completed? _____

What year did you leave school? _____

How old were you when you left school? _____

Do you have any children? YES NO

If so, how many? _____

Are you currently employed? YES NO

How would you classify your economic status?

- ○ Low Income
- ○ Lower Middle Class
- ○ Middle Class
- ○ Upper Middle Class
- ○ Upper Class
- ○ Other _____

Pseudonym _____

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe yourself as a student?

2. How would you describe the program you are studying in now?

3. When I say the word, "adult," what comes to mind for you?
   A. What does the word, "adult," mean to you?

4. When I say the word, "adulthood," what comes to mind for you?
   A. What does the word, "adulthood," mean to you?

5. Do you consider yourself an adult? Why or why not?

6. When do you think you became an adult?
   A. Is there one particular moment/experience that stands out to you in becoming an adult?
   B. Can you describe that moment? If so, please do.

7. Why is it this particular time that you believe you entered adulthood?
   A. What particular experiences stand out to you?
   B. Please describe those experiences that stand out to you.

8. Please describe an experience or experiences you had at this time you claim to have become an adult?

9. What would you say makes someone an adult? Why?

10. What kinds of events do you think makes someone an adult? Why?

11. What is your experience transferring from high school to an adult education/GED program?

12. In what ways is your experience as an adult education student different from your experience as a high school student?

13. How would your friends describe you? How would you describe them?

14. What else would you like to add about leaving school, joining adult basic education classes, or becoming an adult?

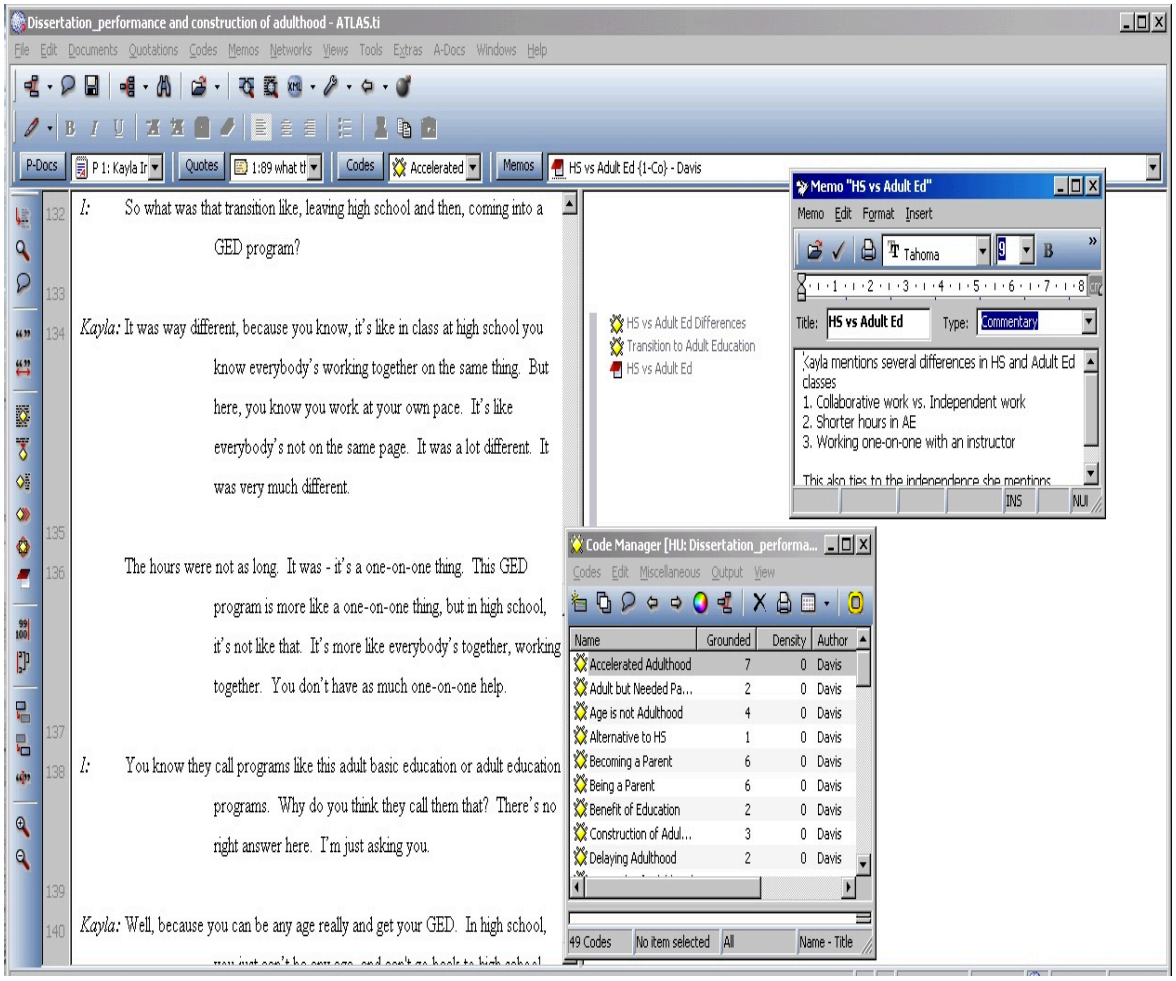
Appendix E: Pledge of Confidentiality

PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

I understand that I be privy to research information in order to give feedback on the researcher's analysis and interpretation. The information presented has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentially agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information revealed to me with anyone except the primary researcher. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Name _____ Date

Appendix F: Screen Shot from Atlas.ti™



Appendix G: Code Map of Data Iterations

First Iteration: Initial Coding using Descriptive and In Vivo Codes (IV)

- Accelerated Adulthood
- Age and Adulthood
- Age is Adulthood
- Age is not Adulthood
- Aging out of Foster Care
- Alternative to High School
- Awareness of Responsibilities
- Becoming a Parent
- Being a Parent
- Being a parent does not mean being an adult
- Being a Role Model
- Being a Spouse
- Being Alone
- Benefit of Education
- Bills
- Biological Age
- Black Men versus White Men
- Caring for Others
- Caring for Self
- Change/Transformation
- College
- Construction of Adulthood
- Critical Moment
- Dependent on help from others
- Does not identify as adult
- Downside of Adulthood
- Experience
- Experience in High School
- Family Life
- Feel like an Adult
- Feelings about Leaving High School
- Financial
- Foster Care
- GED
- Growth
- Having Goals
- Having/Buying a Car
- High School Credits
- Inaugural Moment
- Independence
- Jobs
- Kids
- Lack of Financial Independence
- Leaving High School
- Legal Age
- Maturity
- Me versus Other Kids
- Mental State of Adulthood/Mentality
- Necessities
- Own Living Space
- Parents vs. Non Parent
- Performance of Adulthood
- Pregnancy
- Privilege of Freedom
- Public Housing
- Race
- Regret
- Resisting Adulthood
- Responsibilities
- Being Responsible
- Result of Leaving High School
- Right versus Wrong
- Role of Parent
- Role of Provider
- Set schedules
- Social Class
- Stress
- Subdivision versus Street
- Teen & Adult are different
- Time
- Transition to Adult Ed
- Transition to Adulthood
- Transportation
- Wants to be a Teen
- Wise choices

• High School versus Adult Education Differences • Identifies as Adult • Immaturity • Women versus Men Adults (Gender) • Work • Would have been different • IV (do it) For my kids • IV Adult Age • IV Adult Decisions • IV Babies shouldn't have babies • IV Been through so much/a lot • IV Being in the streets • IV Better/Change my Life • IV Babies shouldn't have babies • IV Been through so much/a lot • IV Being in the streets • IV Better/Change my Life • IV Black Man • IV Breadwinner • IV Climb up a Level • IV Feed, Feed Yourself, Fed • IV Food Stamps • IV God • IV Gotta handle it yourself • IV Grow Up • IV Had To • IV Have to let some things go • IV I'm getting there/It's coming • IV I'm not racist • IV I got kids no • IV Its real life and you have to do it • IV Keeps getting harder • IV Kids are raising themselves • IV Knowing how to act • IV Learn • IV Mother • IV Motherhood • IV Never give up • IV Not scared to fail	• IV Of age • IV On your own • IV One-on-one • IV Overwhelming • IV Paying Bills • IV paying for it • IV playing • IV Privilege • IV Real World/Reality • IV Set an Example • IV Stages • IV Start my Life • IV Streets can be your family • IV Struggle • IV Take care of home • IV Taking Care of Yourself • IV The only white person • IV They Help Me • IV Tough • IV With Nothing • IV Worries

Second Iteration: Merging Descriptive and In Vivo Codes

Age Age and adulthood Age is adulthood Age is not Adulthood Biological Age Legal Age IV of age IV adult age IV gotta handle it myself **Financial** Bills Jobs Lack of Financial Independence Work Set Schedules IV Paying Bills - put this under this heading IV Breadwinner IV Food Stamps IV Worries **Foster Care** Aging out of foster care **Independence** Own Living Space Being Alone IV Taking Care of Yourself IV On your own **Leaving High School** Feelings about leaving HS Transportation Experience in High School Result of Leaving High School Regret Would have Been Different College IV Paying for it IV With Nothing	**Social Class** Public Housing Family Life Subdivision versus Streets Me vs. Other Kids IV Streets can be your family IV Being in the Streets **Being a Parent** Being a parent does not mean being an adult Role of Parent IV Struggle IV Mother **Would have been different** College **Race** Black men vs. White men IV Black Man IV I'm not racist IV The only white person **Role of Provider** Providing Necessities **Transition to Adult Education** HS vs. Adult Ed Differences IV One-on-One IV They help me **Change/Transformation** Critical Moment Growth Maturity **Does not Identify as Adult** Awareness of responsibilities Dependent on help from others Feel like an adult IV I'm getting there/it's coming

GED Alternative to High School Benefit of Education IV Better/Change my Life IV [do it] For my kids **Becoming a Parent** Pregnancy IV Babies shouldn't be having babies IV Motherhood **Teens and Adults are Different** Wants to be a Teen Resisting Adulthood Parents versus Non-Parents Privilege of Freedom IV Privilege Downside of Adulthood (add) IV Kids are raising themselves (add) IV I got kids now **Being a Role Model** IV Set an Example **Responsibilities** Stress **Transition to Adulthood** IV Have to let some things go IV It's real life and you have to do it IV Real World/Reality IV Overwhelming IV Start my Life IV Tough IV Grow Up IV Keeps getting Harder **Experience** IV Been through so much/a lot **Accelerated Adulthood** IV Had to	**Immaturity** IV playing **Right versus Wrong** Wise Choices IV Adult Decisions IV Knowing How to Act • Inaugural Moment • Teen & Adult are different • Social Class • Time • Foster Care • GED • Leaving HS • Race • Kids • Transition to Adult Ed • Change/Transformation • Transition to Adulthood • Women vs Men Adults (Gender) • Does not identify as adult • Accelerated Adulthood • Role of Provider • Experience • Age • Becoming a Parent • Caring for Others • Being a Parent • Mental State of Adulthood/Mentality • Having/Buying a Car • Construction of Adulthood • Responsibilities • Having Goals • Right vs. Wrong • Immaturity • Being Responsible • Caring for self • Being a Role Model • Independence • Financial • Performance of Adulthood • Identifies as Adult

• IV stages • IV Feed, Feed Yourself, Fed • IV Take care of home • IV Not scared to fail • IV Never give up • IV Learn • IV God • IV Grown Person • IV I feel good	

Third Iteration: Broad patterns and themes, networks, and code families

Change/Transformation Becoming a Parent Inaugural Moment Transition to Adulthood	→ is associated with	**Fast Track** Accelerated Adulthood Age Becoming a Parent Experience Role of Provider Caring for Others Being a Parent	→ is part of	**Transitions To Adulthood** Does not identify as adult Foster Care IV stages Adulthood as Mental State Teen & Adult are different Women vs. Men Adults (Gender)

Leaving High School Feelings about leaving HS Transportation Experience in HS Result of Leaving HS Regret Would have Been Different College IV Paying for it IV With Nothing	→ is associated with	**GED** Financial Having Goals IV Learn Social Class Alternative to HS Benefit of Education IV Better/Change my Life IV [do it] For my kids	→ is associated with	**Transition to Adult Education** HS vs. Adult Ed Differences IV One-on-One IV They help me

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Code Family: Construction of Adulthood
Age
Being a Role Model
Being Responsible
Caring for Others
Caring for self
Construction of Adulthood
Experience
Financial
Having Goals
Having/Buying a Car
Immaturity
Independence
IV Feed, Feed Yourself, Fed
IV Learn
IV Never give up
IV Not scared to fail
IV stages
Mental State of Adulthood/Mentality
Responsibilities
Right vs. Wrong
Social Class

Code Family: Performance of Adulthood
Becoming a Parent
Being a Parent
Being a Role Model
Caring for Others
Caring for self
Financial
Identifies as Adult
Independence
IV Feed, Feed Yourself, Fed
IV Never give up
IV Not scared to fail
IV Take care of home
Performance of Adulthood
Role of Provider

Appendix H: Tracy's (2010) Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

Table 1. Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes
Sincerity	The study is characterized by • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethical	The research considers • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)
Meaningful coherence	The study • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. Qualitative Inquiry, 16(10), 837-851

Appendix I: Participant Narratives of Inaugural Moments of Adulthood

This appendix contains the narratives of the eight participants that identified as adults and the events they shared as their entry into adulthood. The narratives were coded, analyzed, and interpreted using Labov's (1972) structured narrative analysis. Each narrative is on a separate page and is presented using Labov's model.

Alan – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	122	Particular time when I became an adult?
Orientation	193	I was probably like 14
Complicating	122	I mean my momma was
Action	123	always out doing whatever she did, and I was always with my
	124	brothers and my sisters. So taking care of them, I think, that made
	125	me become an adult at a young age. So I think just taking care of
	126	them, watching my brothers and sisters, I think that's what made me
	127	an adult.
	156	I had to wake
	157	up probably like 6:00 just to still pick up around the house, wake
	158	them up for school, get my brother, taking a shower, and just do all
	158	kind of stuff. Then I still had to get myself ready. My sister and
	160	'helping her with the little stuff she needed help with.
	179	This one time,
	181	The couch had caught on fire, and then I
	182	didn't really want to call the police or nothing because we were
	183	there by our self, and I didn't want the family to get taken away, so
	184	I had to put out the fire and stuff like that. But just doing that, it
	185	made me think something bad really could have happened, and all of
	186	us could have been killed just not doing – just not reacting on it.
Evaluation	201	At that moment, I was scared, but then once everything happened,
	202	and then nobody find out, and I was like, "Man." Because I didn't
	203	think I could deal with it. But then, I was like, "Man, it wasn't a big
	204	deal," because I always had to look at my brother, so I was sure –
	205	like I'm his daddy.
Resolution		So I think that made me – that made me think like if I was a big boy then.
Coda	209	He's getting older…But I
	201	Still feel – I look after him, though.

Booman – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	101	When do you think you became an adult?
Orientation	103	I think I became an adult when I was 17.
Complicating	107	Like, my – see, my mom was having trouble with a lot of things.
Action	108	Like, she didn't have no job because of the economy, and we
	109	didn't have food really so I had to walk to the food line. And we had
	110	two other brothers so they had to eat too.
	114	So I just – I used to walk and bring the food back for my mom
	115	because she couldn't do it because of her leg.
	116	because my daddy wasn't helping so I had to do
	117	it myself
Evaluation	139	I just, like, I started going to church, and, like, I feel that God gave me
	140	understanding to be a real man, and, like, surely if you want to be a
	141	man this is how it is.
Resolution	115	But I think that's when I became a man is when I understood what I
	116	was supposed to do
Coda	110	So I used to
	111	walk to the food line and I still – I just thank God for it, though,
	112	because without that I probably wouldn't be eating [then]
	141	Like, things get hard so you just got to
	142	keep going, and that's what I did.

JeVaunte – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	53	So, tell me more about being an adult and when do you think you
	54	became an adult?
Orientation	56	I became an adult is when I went to Nashville.
	69	I was 18.
Complicating	56	I had to live on my
Action	57	own for six months and it was very hard.
	80	When I was getting my stuff taken care of such as my birth
	81	certificate, Social Security card, ID
	82	I always had my Mamma to do it and then, when I went up there and
	83	had to do it on my own, didn't nobody help me.
	84	I had to get on the phone myself, schedule the appointment saying do
	86	it yourself. Mamma wasn't there to help me. So, I had to learn on
	87	my own…
Evaluation	58	But I
	59	figured that since I learned how to survive on my own and fend for
	60	myself and nobody else do it for me, I figured this must be part of
	61	growing up and I like it.
Resolution/	57	I struggled, but I made it
Coda	58	through some situations and then I had to come back here.

Juice – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	168	When do you think you started moving into adulthood?
Orientation	171	When I had my baby
	175	at 17
Complicating	175	I got pregnant at 16…My momma
Action	176	was on drugs for like seven years. Then my daddy was
	177	in and out of jail, so I really didn't have nobody to just talk to. So,
	178	I basically had to grown myself up, when I had him.
Evaluation	180	That made me want to mature
	181	quicker. I mean, I felt like I was mature for my age, but that just
	182	did it.
Resolution	182	So when I turned 18, I got a job. It took me a little
	183	minute, but I got my own place.
Coda	183	Everything going good, so far.

Kayla – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	83	…whenever you think you became an adult.
Orientation	85	The day I left home. The day I moved out, got my own place. I
	86	was 19. I moved out. My baby was about two or three months
	87	old, my oldest son. I just took it upon myself, moved out with
	88	everything I had. After I had him, I just felt like I had to grow up.
	89	You know like, it was time that I leave my mom, and not be in my
	90	mom's house.
Complicating	181	I mean, when I had them, I just couldn't be a kid no more.
Action	182	I couldn't hang out with my friends whenever I wanted to. I had to
	183	pause calls and be like, oh, I got a baby. I had to stay home.
Evaluation	90	It was tough for me to get out and do what I had to do, to take care
	91	of him.
	96	It was tough. It was very tough. Like, I needed my mom. I really,
	97	much needed my mom. I had to go back for a while, stay home.
	98	Like I still had my apartment, but I would stay at my mom's
	99	house, because I needed her help.
Resolution/Coda	99	Like it was tough at first, but as the
	100	years have went on, it's been three years now since I've been
	101	moved out. I came a long way from then. Like I don't call my
	102	mom every second and have to lean on her for everything
	183	It's still times
	184	I can't do stuff, you know.

Marie – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	155 156	do you think that that's when you became an adult?
Orientation	179 251	Three years [ago] So I would say I was about 23.
Complicating Action	151 152	when I was pregnant with my son in 2008, I think that's when it really hit me [that I was an adult].
Evaluation	158 159	It was probably a little bit before that, but then when that happened [pregnancy], it really snapped into reality 'cause I'm not a baby no more. I had one in me.
Resolution/Coda	150 151	Oh, it's just fun and games, but one day I just woke up, and I'm, like, "Look, you're 25. You're five years away from 30. You're an adult."

Matt – Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	124	So thinking back over your life, when you do think you became an
	125	adult? Is there one particular experience that stands out to you?
Orientation	126	when I had turned 17 and my ex-girl had said
	127	she's pregnant
	139	Yeah, I was living in the North Knoxville area and I was standing
	140	next to the restroom. She just walked in the living room, the front
	141	door, and she came in there and she was kinda crying and I was
	142	like, "What's wrong with you," and she was like, "I don't know
	143	how to say it other than I'm pregnant," and I was like, "Oh, shit."
Complicating	147	I had gotten in a little bit of trouble after that and then I
Action	148	was just – I said I ain't gonna be like the father that I had. I'm
	149	gonna be there and see my kids. I'm not gonna just say, "Screw
	150	my kids," and go do what I wanna do just because. No, that's not
	151	me. I'm gonna be the father that I didn't have
Evaluation	128	I used to be crazy, like robbing people and catching
	129	violent charges and stuff like that and now I got responsibilities.
	130	It turned my whole life around when
	131	she said that because then I have a kid and it was like I gotta
	132	change. I can't be out here robbing people and going to jail and
	133	not being able to see my kid, you know what I'm saying? I've
	134	gotta be there for my kid instead of robbing people and ending up
	135	in the penitentiary somewhere.
Resolution/Coda	127	it changed
	128	me
	137	I mean it is kind of big. It's like, dang, I don't know. It's priceless.

Susan– Inaugural Moment of Adulthood

Component	*Line #*	*Narrative Text*
Abstract	122	when you think that you
	123	became an adult, and is there one particular moment or experience
	124	that stands out for you?
Orientation	126	I feel I became an adult when I had my first child even though I
	127	wasn't over the adult age. I was only 17. But I was paying for my
	128	own things
Complicating	126	even though I
Action	127	wasn't over the adult age. I was only 17. But I was paying for my
	128	own things
	196	[I remember] Just having a lot to do, and it had to be done, or else it
	196	wouldn't
	197	have been done, because no one's going to do it for you.
	198	
Evaluation	203	when you have the kids
	204	and you have like certain friends and they do certain things, you're
	205	not going to be able to do them as much. And you should be able
	206	to feel good about letting them go for the kids or whatever
	207	
Resolution	128	And then eventually I moved out and did adult things,
	129	as in work, and took care of home.
	207	I watched my mom do her adult duties, so I
	208	got some practice then.
Coda	199	It’s called growing up.

Vita

Amelia Davis grew up in Greenville, North Carolina. She completed requirements for a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1995 from East Carolina University. Following completion of her undergraduate degree, Amelia moved to Japan for her first teaching job with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET). In 1998 Amelia continued her love of travel and teaching when she moved to Moscow, Russia to teach for three years. In 2001 she returned to the United States and in 2003 completed her Masters of Education degree in Adult Education and Training from Seattle University in Seattle, Washington before moving to Shanghai, China to teach at the university level. Amelia has worked in the field of adult education for nearly 15 years as an instructor, administrator, and program planner. Her work has involved teaching in all areas of adult basic education including General Education Development (GED,) Adult High School Completion, literacy, compensatory education, English as a Second Language (ESL), and workplace training. Before beginning her doctoral program in 2008, she worked at South Seattle Community College as Career Services Coordinator of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Programs. Amelia completed a certificate in Qualitative Research Methods in Education and a minor in Cultural Studies in Education at The University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2010. She is currently employed as a Graduate Research Assistant at The University of Tennessee and is an active volunteer tutor with adult basic education programs in the Knoxville area. Upon acceptance of this dissertation, Amelia will have graduated with a Ph. D. in Educational Psychology and Research from The University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2012.